

A FAITH BOLD MYSTERY--BOOK #7

SO

ALONE



BLAKE PIERCE

SO ALONE

(A Faith Bold Mystery —Book
Seven)

B L A K E P I E R C E

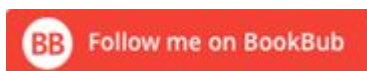
Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising thirty-one books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising sixteen books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising ten books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the FAITH BOLD mystery

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An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

Consciousness came to Gigi slowly. The first thing she was aware of was a gentle rolling sensation, as though she was moving up and over the crest of a wave. The waves grew gradually more powerful, and she grew nauseous as they grew in intensity.

She moved her head, and the waves morphed into deep, throbbing pulses centered behind her eyes. She groaned, and the pulses sent rhythmic stabs of pain through her temples. She gasped, and a lightning bolt of agony shot through her skull.

She squeezed her eyes shut, pushing out tears as the pain pushed her back toward unconsciousness.

After what felt like hours, the pain calmed enough that she could open her eyes. She did and was immediately stabbed with bright white light. She gasped again, and this gasp ended in a choking sob. She took a deep breath and released it slowly, willing herself back to alertness little by little.

The pain in her head eased slightly after a few minutes, enough that she was able to open her eyes and see that it wasn't bright at all. The sword of light that had pierced her skull earlier was a single streetlamp that illuminated the ground she lay on.

She sat up slowly, gritting her teeth against the nausea and headache. She couldn't remember what happened, couldn't remember anything from yesterday after leaving for her morning walk.

She kept her eyes open and focused on her breathing until her vision coalesced. What had happened to her? Where was she?

She looked around and saw that she was in what looked like an industrial lot. Forklifts and other heavy equipment were parked in rows a few dozen yards away. A few dozen yards past that, piles of rocks and stacks of steel beams sat in orderly rows. To the other side were more beams and bags of

concrete powder. She was in some sort of storage backlot for a construction company.

What the hell was she doing here? The nearest industrial park was over twenty miles from the upper-class Rolling Hills Estates where she lived. How had she gotten here?

A shadow caught her eye near one of the machines. The silhouette of a man. She blinked, but despite clearing her vision, all she could see was his shadow.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice hoarse and croaking. “Where am I? Did you bring me here?”

The silhouette didn’t respond.

Panic wormed its way into her consciousness. She wasn’t naïve. She knew it meant nothing good that she was trapped here in some backlot with her head pounding while a strange man watched her from the shadows.

“Please,” she said, “I have money. I can pay you. Just please let me go.”

He spoke then, a soft, almost gentle voice that nonetheless carried a hint of venom. “You’re going to pay for what you did.”

Her heart froze. Pay? For what? What did she do? Did he think she was someone else?”

“What are you talking about?” she pleaded, “Pay for what?”

That’s when she heard it. A low, ominous growl, followed by another, then another. More shadows appeared next to the man. Big shadows, low to the ground, shadows with long snouts filled with teeth.

One of the unseen dogs barked, and the man said, “for everything.”

Panic clutched her like a vise. “Please!” she cried out, “just tell me what I did!”

“You know,” he said.

“No I don’t!” she said. “Please!”

He lifted a hand, and she realized with a sinking feeling that he wasn't going to accept her pleas. Whatever he thought she did, he was going to kill her for it.

The dogs growled and snapped and barked, and a few of them approached closely enough that she could see their massive muzzles and bared fangs in front of their glowing red eyes.

They were big dogs, Rottweilers or Shepherds. Guard dogs. Dogs that could easily rip her limb from limb if so commanded. A few dogs were smaller, terriers and spaniels, but they bared their teeth and barked just as ferociously as the bigger dogs.

"You can try to run if you'd like," the voice said calmly, "it won't matter."

It was a lilting tenor, soft, almost feminine. The contrast between that soft voice and the low growl of the dogs terrified her.

"Better hurry," the voice said.

She got up and started running just before she heard the snap of a finger and the roar of the dogs as they rushed their quarry.

Gigi's heart was pounding in her chest as she sprinted across the open lot. The sound of the dogs chasing her was thunderous, and she was sure they would catch up to her at any second. She didn't know how she had gotten here or what she had supposedly done to deserve this, but she knew she had to get away or the dogs would tear her apart.

She spotted a tall chain-link fence at the edge of the lot. She didn't know if she would be able to climb it, but it was her best chance. She pushed herself forward, her legs pumping as fast as they could go.

The dogs were getting closer, their breath hot on the back of her neck. She could hear their snarls and growls, and she could feel their teeth just inches away from her. A terrible macabre urge to look back gripped her, but she didn't succumb to it. She didn't want to see them.

She reached the fence and grabbed onto it, using all her strength to pull herself up. The dogs were almost on her, but she could make it. If she could just make it a few more feet, she could—

Pain shot through her calf, scintillating, pure, exquisite. She shrieked, and her resolve disappeared. She looked down and saw a massive Pit Bull, its teeth buried to the bone in her calf. She screamed and tried to pull away, but the dog was too strong. She clung to the fence with all of her might, but it ripped her down almost casually, as though her weight meant nothing to it.

She screamed and tried to regain her feet, but it was too late. The dogs were upon her, snarling, biting, ripping, tearing. She had just enough time to twist her head around and see the man's silhouette in the distance before the dogs were upon her. She tried to scream, but a gurgling wheeze was the final sound she heard before the world went black.

CHAPTER ONE

She wouldn't scream. She wouldn't give him that satisfaction. He could kill her if he wanted to, but she would be damned if he would hear her scream.

Trammell approached, turning the rusty blade over in his hand almost lovingly. He grinned at her, revealing yellow, rotted teeth beneath crazed, bloodshot eyes. He lowered the blade and rested its point above Faith's knee, just above the Quadriceps tendon.

She stiffened in spite of herself, and a cold sweat broke out on her forehead. Jethro saw this, and his grin widened. He leaned close to her. Her nostrils flared at the scent of her sour breath.

"Let's see how you bleed, little girl."

He pressed down with the knife and drew it across her thigh. Faith's resolve vanished, blown out as effortlessly as a child's birthday candle, and she screamed.

"Miss Bold?"

Faith blinked and looked up from the chair. The police detective returned her gaze with the coldly professional stare of a trained officer. She waited until she had Faith's attention, then asked, "Can you describe to me what you saw when you entered the apartment?"

Faith took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I saw what you saw," she said, "signs of a struggle, and my friend's body on the floor with his throat cut."

"You said the door was locked, correct?" the detective asked.

"Yes," Faith replied.

“May I ask how you managed to enter the apartment?”

Faith felt a touch of irritation. “I’m a trained investigator for the FBI.”

“That’s not an answer, Miss Bold.”

Faith met the officer’s eyes and tried to quell her rising anger. The detective stared back impassively, but Faith’s trained eye could tell she was watching Faith’s reaction carefully, trying to gauge her honesty and determine if there was any guilt.

The problem was that there was guilt. A whole hell of a lot of guilt. Gordon Clark was dead, and while Faith might not have been the one holding the knife, she was just as responsible for his death as if she had cut her throat herself.

She knew that wasn’t true. She knew that her guilt was misplaced and that her reaction was very common among people who lost loved ones to serial killers.

Knowing that didn’t lessen her guilt at all.

“Miss Bold? How did you—”

“I used a bobby pin and a jeweler’s screwdriver,” Faith answered. “I carry them on me in case I need access to a locked location while investigating a crime.”

“And this is standard-issue Bureau equipment?” the detective asked, knowing full well that it wasn’t.”

Faith sighed, no longer possessed of the patience to deal with the detective. The office was just doing her job, but the reality was that it would only be her job for another fifteen minutes, and when those fifteen minutes were up, Faith would no longer be even remotely a suspect.

“Look, detective, I know I’m not under arrest, and I also know that in a few minutes, this is going to be a Bureau case, and you won’t be allowed within a half-mile of anything having to do with it. I’m sure you’re a great detective, but I don’t have the goddamned patience to be interrogated right now, so go fill out some fucking paperwork. Better yet, go have a damned cigarette and wait for the cavalry to arrive and put you out of a job.”

The detective was well-trained and didn't react emotionally to Faith's outburst. She simply said, "You may be right, Special Agent, but until I am officially removed from this case, I have a job to do, and I intend to do it. Do you have a good reason for breaking into Mr. Clark's apartment and waiting to call police until you examined the scene and tampered with evidence?"

Faith took a deep breath and released it slowly. "When he didn't answer the doorbell, I figured he was probably in trouble or hurt."

"So you attempted to announce your presence to Mr. Clark before you broke into his home?"

"I didn't attempt shit, detective," Faith spat. "I announced it. Gordon was dead, so he didn't hear me."

"All right," the detective said calmly, lifting a hand. "So you entered the apartment and found it as you see here."

"Yes," Faith said, calming slightly.

"Do you know who might have done this?"

"Who the hell do you think?" Faith said, losing her cool once more. "He left a damned note!"

"With all due respect, Miss Bold—"

"Special Agent Bold," Faith bit.

"Special Agent Bold," the detective corrected, still unflappably calm, "this crime scene doesn't match the Copycat Donkey Killer's MO."

"Well, he doesn't usually pick victims with years of training in law enforcement," Faith replied. "Gordon fought for his life. But it's him. I know it's him."

"How do you know?"

"I just know!" Faith shouted. "I've been working on this case for years!"

"Yes," the officer agreed, "but up until recently, that work was without the permission and, in fact, expressly against the instructions of your superiors, correct?"

“Oh, for crying out—” Faith rolled her eyes. “Are you seriously considering me as a suspect? That’s your smart cop conclusion? She happened to be here, so she probably did it?”

“I’m just doing my job, ma’am,” the officer demurred in her goddamned infuriating bedside manner voice.

Faith sighed and shook her head. “Well, with all due respect, detective, I’m going to sit here and wait until it isn’t your job anymore before I answer any more questions.”

The detective looked about to reply, but a moment later, Faith’s partner, Michael Prince, and Faith’s boss, Special-Agent-in-Charge Grant Monroe—known to his employees as the Boss—entered the apartment, brushing past a protesting uniform who looked just about old enough to shave.

The Boss hooked a thumb behind him and addressed the detective. “Out.”

A flash of irritation crossed the detective’s face. “Sir, proper channels need to be followed before—”

“Proper channels will be having you write parking tickets for the next twenty years if I hear your voice again or see anyone who doesn’t work for the FBI at this crime scene in three minutes. Out.”

The detective reddened, and Faith felt a perverse pleasure at seeing the first display of real emotion on the officer’s face. She glared at Faith, and Faith returned the look in kind.

The detective sighed and left the room, followed quickly by the uniforms, most of whom looked relieved as they filed out after her.

Michael crossed the room and wrapped Faith in his arms. Faith allowed the embrace for a moment, then pushed gently away. She appreciated Michael’s attempt at comfort, but she wasn’t in a mood to be comforted right now.

The Boss looked down at Grant’s body and his shoulders slumped. For a brief moment, he looked every bit the sixty-year-old man he was.

He sighed and shook his head. “Dammit.”

When he looked up at Faith, the gruff exterior was back, but his eyes shone with a cold fury that was the closest thing to hate that she'd ever seen on his face.

"You said the copycat killer did this?" he asked.

Faith nodded. "He left me a note."

The Boss held his hand out, and Faith produced the crumpled note. He scanned it, and when his eyes reached the flourished signature at the bottom, he chuckled mirthlessly. "What a prick," he said, crumpling the note again and squeezing his fist until the knuckles turned white. "What a fucking prick."

"Do you want CSI to look at Gordon's body before the coroner takes it away?" Michael asked, gently reminding both Faith and the Boss that they had an investigation to complete.

The Boss nodded. "Yeah. Let's bring 'em in."

Michael gestured to the team waiting outside, and the CSIs filed in. They immediately got to work on Gordon's body, taking pictures and dusting talcum powder on his clothes to check for fingerprints. Faith knew they were only doing their jobs—hell, it was a job she herself had done on occasion—but she couldn't watch them treating Gordon like nothing more than a number.

The Boss apparently felt the same. "Let's get out of here," he said to Faith and Michael. "I can't watch this."

The three agents left the apartment and walked to the parking lot, where police cars still waited. The detective who had questioned Faith earlier started toward her when she saw them, but a glare from the Boss stopped her.

"We'll go back to the field office," the Boss said. "If I have to look at that bitch one more time, I might have her fired just for the hell of it."

The Boss was irascible, but not typically given to disrespect. He was clearly just as upset about Gordon's death as Faith was.

Michael drove to the office. The three agents were silent on the drive. Michael glanced at Faith in the rearview mirror, and

Faith could see the worry in his eyes. He had seen the impact the first Donkey Killer had on her, and he had seen the way the Copycat Killer case affected her. He likely assumed that finding her friend dead at the hands of someone claiming to be the murderer who's inspiration was the man who paralyzed her would traumatize her and possibly send her spiraling into suicidal thoughts again.

Well, he didn't need to worry about that, at least. Faith wouldn't do anything to hurt herself. She would find the man who killed Gordon, and she would make him pay. She would look into his eyes as she pulled the trigger herself. That's the fate he would receive for killing her friend.

Turk waited for them at the office. The big German Shepherd paced anxiously in front of the entrance and when he saw Michael's car turn into the parking lot, he barked and rushed toward the vehicle.

"I thought I locked him in the break room," Michael said, mostly to himself.

"You brought him here?" Faith asked, "Why not to the scene?"

"Because you're off the case," the Boss said.

Faith's eyes snapped toward him, but before she could protest, Turk leaped bodily into her arms, whining and licking her face as he tried desperately to comfort her. Faith wanted his comfort as desperately as he wanted to give it, but the Boss's sudden revelation captured her attention at the moment.

"Boss," she said, finally managing to coax Turk back on all fours.

The Boss ignored her, marching into the field office without slowing. She jogged to catch him, Turk following at her side, Michael following much more slowly.

She caught the Boss just before he entered his office. "Boss, what the hell?" she began.

"Inside, Bold," the Boss said, brushing past her and walking into his office.

She followed him inside, and Turk glued himself to her, sitting right next to her while she stood in front of the Boss's desk. "Boss—"

"A moment, Faith," the Boss said.

He walked around his desk and collapsed heavily into his easy chair. Once more, his face looked old and haggard. Faith was shocked and disturbed by how much he seemed to have aged, but once more there were more pressing concerns on her mind.

"Boss, what the hell? Why am I off the case? You assigned me to consult with this case in the first place."

"We're all off the case, Faith," the Boss said.

Faith blinked, taken aback by the Boss's use of her first name. In ten years with him, she had never heard him use her first name except once during the formal ceremony when he announced her promotion from Agent-in-training to full-fledged Special Agent. While she stood, stunned, Michael entered the room. As soon as the door closed softly behind him, she found her voice. "What do you mean, we're all off the case?"

"I mean what I said," the Boss replied, his voice strangely tired and subdued. "We've royally fucked this one, and I mean royally. We've had four agents working on this case—legitimately or otherwise—for close to two years, and we've come up empty. This guy's killed thirty people, and we still don't know him from Babe Ruth. Now we have another asshole using that name to kill federal agents."

"Not another asshole," Faith insisted. "This is the Copycat Killer. I know it is. Let me run the case. Give me a lead. Boss, I've been thinking of nothing but this case since he showed up. Give me the case, and I'll find this asshole. I promise."

The Boss sighed. "Faith, the fact that you've been obsessing over this is the reason I can't give it to you. You're emotionally compromised. He's the spitting image of the man who nearly killed you. I don't blame you for wanting him, Faith, but you're not going to think objectively about this."

"Yes, I will," Faith insisted, "I have thought objectively."

“Like when you broke Jared Greenwood’s door down after following him illegally for over a month?” the Boss asked. Jared Greenwood was a petty criminal and drug dealer who Faith suspected as the copycat killer primarily because his father, Horace Greenwood, was also a serial killer.

“That was—” Faith began.

“Or when you questioned family members of the victims and lied about your role on the case.”

Faith reddened, “Boss, I—”

“Or when you visited the coroner and tried to call in personal favors to get information on the case from him?”

“Every agent does that!” she shouted.

“Or now, when you take at face value a note that has his signature when nothing else about Gordon’s murder matches the Copycat’s MO.”

Faith’s lips thinned. She looked down and didn’t say anything else. She knew it was the Copycat Killer who killed Gordon as surely as she knew that it was the original Donkey Killer who had nearly killed her, but she didn’t have anything other than the note left behind to justify her assumption. Objectively, it was very possible that the killer had simply used the Copycat’s name to throw them off the scent.

But it *was* the Copycat Killer. Faith *knew* it.

“Faith,” the Boss said after a moment. “you’re emotionally compromised. Your friend is now dead, and you’re going to stay emotionally compromised for a while. I’m compromised too. Gordon was my friend too, and an agent I respected highly. I had plans for him to take over for me when I retired. He would have been a damned good SAC too. He saved your career and gave Chavez a chance to learn how to be a real agent. He knew how to work with people better than I ever did. And now he’s gone.”

He steeped his hands on the desk and said, half to himself, “I’m giving this to the New York field office.”

“What?” Faith asked, surprised. “New York?”

“Yes,” the Boss said. “We’ve done everything we can do, which has been precious little. I’m hoping the New York guys will be detached enough to start seeing patterns we’re missing.”

“Boss, this is a mistake,” Faith said. “I can—”

“No!” the Boss shouted, so loudly that she, Michael and Turk both jumped. He glared at Faith. “No, I’m not losing you too. I already almost lost you twice to one of these damned Donkey Killers. I’m not going to give one of them a chance to succeed. We’re not making this personal.”

“But Boss, *he’s* made this personal,” Faith said. “He threatened me. He threatened people close to me. He’s going to come after me, and he’s going to finish what Trammell started if we don’t finish it first!”

“This isn’t up for discussion, Bold,” the Boss said firmly. “This is the right decision and the decision I should have made years ago. I’m sorry, Faith. Not because I’m making this decision now but because I didn’t stay true to this decision before. You are the wrong choice for the job. You’re a great agent, but you’re too close to this case and the one before it, and now you’re seeing the Copycat Killer in every murder you encounter.”

“I’m not just imagining things,” Faith said, pleading. “Some of the things in that note... he knows things about me that people who don’t know me personally wouldn’t know. He knows people in my life. He’s killed one of my friends, and he’s going to keep killing them. He threatened Michael in that note, and he threatened David.”

“Who’s David?” the Boss asked.

“Boyfriend,” Michael replied.

The Boss sighed. “Put him in protective custody, if you think you can get authorization, Faith.”

“Boss, that’s only thirty days without evidence of a credible threat,” she said.

“Which you don’t have,” the Boss pointed out.

“I do, but it’s not something that anyone else would recognize,” she said. “It’s like I said, there are things in that note that only I would know.”“ The Boss shared a look with Michael, and Faith felt her frustration threaten to overwhelm her. “Boss, he’s going to target my loved ones no matter what I do,” Faith insisted. “It’s like you said, he’s obsessing over me. Having me lay low won’t help.”

“Faith,” the Boss said, still softly but very seriously. “You are off the case. Discussion over.”

Faith didn’t reply. She sighed and hung her head, irritated but not surprised to find tears in her eyes.

“Go on home,” the Boss said gently. “Both of you. I’ll make arrangements for Gordon. It’s my duty as his superior. I’ll see you two on Monday.”

Faith spun on her heel and left without another word. Turk followed her, gazing anxiously up at her as she headed toward the exit. Desrouleaux—Gordon’s former partner—and Chavez—the youngest agent at the field office and Desrouleaux’s new partner/protégé—approached, presumably to commiserate with her, but they stopped when they saw her expression and allowed her to leave.

It was happening again. It was happening all over again. Just when she thought she was safe and that she could leave Trammell and the trauma he’d put her through in the past, the new Donkey Killer had rewarded her lapse in attention by murdering her friend and mentor and one of the finest men she’d ever known.

And he’d threatened Michael, Ellie and David. Her loved ones were in danger, and it was all her fault. She should never have pulled away from the case. She should never have let it go. Dr. West had suggested it was best for her mental health that she drop the case, but Dr. West was wrong. This was her responsibility and she had forfeited it and now Gordon was dead, and her friends were next.

And the Boss didn’t believe her. Now, he was taking the case from her and giving it to strangers who had no idea what this man was capable of.

“Faith!”

Faith paused with her hand on the handle of her door and waited for Michael to catch up. Turk barked happily when Michael arrived, hoping that he could help cheer Faith up. Michael paused to ruffle Turk’s fur reassuringly, then looked up at Faith. “Faith, you know I love you—” he began.

She turned away and opened the car door. With surprising quickness, Michael stood and slammed it shut. “Faith, don’t be stupid.”

“I need a moment, Michael,” she said tersely, hating the tears that continued to fall. “Can I have a goddamned moment? Please?”

“Promise me you won’t be stupid,” he said, keeping his hand on the door. “Promise me you won’t go off on a wild goose chase and get yourself hurt or killed like last time.”

Faith’s eyes snapped to his, but her angry retort died on her lips when she saw the worry in his eyes. Michael had rescued her from the first Donkey Killer when she was moments from death. Back then, she had left on her own, too impatient with procedure to wait for the manhunt to begin properly. Her reward for her impatience was months-long paralysis and an ongoing struggle with depression and PTSD that had nearly cost her career and her relationships. Michael had pulled her from the brink of disaster the first time, but he didn’t want to watch her tempt fate again.

She sighed and released the door handle. “All right,” she said softly. “I won’t do anything stupid. I promise.”

Michael nodded and took his hand off of the door. “If you need anything, call me,” he said. “I’m sorry, Faith.”

She wiped tears from her eyes in short, angry swipes. “He was your friend too, Michael. We’re both sorry.”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “Yeah, we are.”

His face tensed, and he looked past her shoulder into the distance for a moment. He looked back at her and forced a smile. “We’ll be okay.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, “but Gordon won’t.”

His smile faded. “No. No, he won’t.”

They stood in silence for a long moment. In another life, Faith would have thrown herself into his arms, and he would have held her and together they would have wept and mourned and healed.

But that was another life, and in this life, the best they could do was stand in silence a moment and wrestle privately with their demons.

It was Michael who broke the impasse, nodding and laying a hand on Faith’s shoulder. “I’ll see you Monday,” he said.

He squeezed briefly, and for a split second, Faith wanted nothing more than to forget everything and collapse into his arms and weep. Then he pulled his hand away, and the walls came up again.

“See you Monday,” she said, forcing herself to meet his eyes.

He smiled sadly and left. Faith watched him walk away until Turk whined and rubbed his head on her legs. She reached down and ruffled his fur behind his ears, then opened the door and let him inside.

Her mind was a blank as she drove home. She drove mechanically, and when she arrived home, she filled Turk’s water and food bowls mechanically. He left the bowls untouched and followed her, his eyes never leaving her as she microwaved a tv dinner—did they still call them tv dinners?—and sat on her couch.

She turned the tv on to a news channel. A tropical storm in California—the first in over eighty years—had flooded cities and covered highways in mud. A species of dolphin was past the point of no return and would go extinct within ten years. A war overseas was leaving cities in rubble and civilians dead and displaced by the millions.

The world went on.

Turk nudged her legs, and she looked down to see eyes full of a love and trust more pure than that of which any human was capable. She dropped to her knees in front of the couch and wrapped her arms tightly around him. She sobbed once, a

hoarse, choking cry, then wept, tears soaking his coat as he stood strong and pressed his head to hers.

CHAPTER TWO

David came to her the moment she got out of the car. She threw her arms around him and burst into tears. She wondered how long she would weep like this.

“I’m so sorry,” he said gently as he rocked her back and forth in his arms. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Faith closed her eyes and breathed in his scent—leather and cinnamon. She squeezed her arms more tightly around him and breathed deeply and slowly. Her tears subsided, but she held him a moment longer before releasing him.

He smiled compassionately at her and brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. “You okay?” he asked.

Faith thought it odd and wonderful how the most foolish questions were the most welcome when asked by someone you loved. She smiled and kissed him softly. “Not even close,” she replied honestly.

He nodded in understanding and kissed her forehead. “Yeah, I don’t blame you,” he said. “Do you want to come inside?”

“I would absolutely love to,” she said.

Turk barked, sensing now as the moment when it was all right for him to join the conversation. David smiled broadly at him and held his arms out for a hug. Turk obliged, leaping into the doctor’s arms and licking his face exuberantly, tail wagging like a puppy’s.

David laughed and endured the onslaught of affection for a moment before setting the big dog on the ground and leading both of them inside. A few minutes later, the three of them sat in the kitchen, Turk happily working through a bowl full of the fancy dog food that David kept on hand, the two humans working through a plate of eggs, sausage links and fried potatoes served with a cup of some fancy heirloom coffee that

David had picked up from Morning Glory—the local coffee shop where Faith had first met him.

She thought wryly that David and Michael would get along swimmingly, if for no other reason than their love of fancy coffee. She chuckled, and David looked quizzically at her. She shook her head. “Just thinking of another friend of mine who likes fancy coffee.”

“Hey, I can buy some cans of the cheap stuff for you if you’d prefer,” David teased.

“This is fine,” Faith said, sipping her brew. “Thank you.”

There was a momentary pause where both steeled themselves for the uncomfortable conversation ahead. Then David asked, “So when’s the memorial service?”

“Next week,” Faith said. “He’s being released from the coroner today and cremated tomorrow. They’re waiting a few days more for the memorial so his family from Ireland can attend.”

“They’re not doing a wake?”

“I think they are,” Faith said, “after the memorial.”

“You should go,” David said, “I’ll bet they’d love to hear your stories about him.”

Faith tensed slightly. She appreciated the thought behind a joyful celebration of a person’s life, but she couldn’t believe that drinking and laughing and joking would eliminate the pain and void of death, even for a moment. Not for her, at least.

“Maybe,” she said. “There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about, though.”

“What is it?” he asked.

She sipped her coffee and sighed. She didn’t relish the argument she knew she was about to have, but she knew she had to endure it.

“The killer—the one who killed Gordon—he threatened you.”

David blinked. “Me? Are you sure?”

She nodded. "I'm not supposed to tell you about this, since it's evidence, but the killer left a note for me with Gordon's body."

"A note for you?"

"Yes. He told me that it was my fault for getting Gordon killed, and that if I didn't back off, he would come after you and Michael next."

"He said those words exactly?"

"Well, not exactly," Faith admitted, "but it was clear from the subtext of the message that's what he meant."

David's expression shifted. It was slight, too slight for most people to notice, but Faith was trained to notice things like that, and she could tell by the subtle tic at the left corner of his mouth and the tightening around his eyes that he didn't believe her.

"I'm not being paranoid," she said, "this is real, David."

"I didn't say you were being paranoid," he replied carefully. "I didn't say anything, in fact."

"David, please believe me," Faith pressed. "You're in danger. You need to get somewhere safe."

"What do you mean, somewhere safe?"

"I don't know," she said, "Somewhere out of the Philadelphia area. Probably out of state."

"You want me to go out of state?" David sighed, and Faith's trained eye told her he had rejected the threat out of hand. "Faith, I can't do that. I have patients."

"Yes," she agreed. "Patients who need you. Patients who don't want to see you killed by a crazed murderer."

"Faith..." David hesitated. He tapped his fingers on the table, and finally said, "Faith, I understand that you're hurting a lot right now, and I understand that you're scared. You've lost a friend, and—"

"David, this isn't paranoia!" Faith interrupted, raising her voice in frustration. "For God's sake, he left that note for *me*,

David! He threatened my friends and loved ones. That's you, David."

"He left *a* note," David corrected. "*A* note that didn't mention my name. That's not enough for me to run off and leave my life behind."

God, she hated the gentleness in his voice, like he was talking to a child throwing a tantrum.

"He mentioned *my* name, David," she said. "He mentioned Bold. He said Gordon died like a Prince—that's Michael's last name—and he said that no veterinary doctor on earth could have saved Gordon. That's you."

"He said veterinary doctor specifically?"

"Yes! He said that ultimately, no veterinary doctor could save this bull—"

"This bull," David interrupted. "Not Gordon."

"Well, obviously, he was referring to Gordon!" Faith snapped. "Who the hell else would it be?"

"Okay," David said, once more in that infuriatingly calm voice as he lifted a hand to calm her. "Okay. I can see how the note was worrisome, but that doesn't mean that my life is in immediate danger."

"He has to be," Faith insisted. "There are too many things in there that can't be explained by any other reason than that he knows me."

"Well, you've put a lot of people behind bars," David said. "If anything, I think you should be more concerned with yourself. Can you get protection if he comes after you?"

"He's not coming after me," Faith insisted. "Not now, anyway. He doesn't want to kill me, he wants to break me. He's going to kill the people I care about one by one until I have nothing left. Hell, he might not even kill me after that. He might just disappear and sit on a beach somewhere in Bali laughing about the crazed FBI agent who's stuck spending the rest of her life in a futile hunt for the man who ruined her life."

"Faith," David said in that goddamned calm tone. "Listen to yourself. People in your profession die every day. They get

murdered every day. I don't mean to be brutal, but it seems to me like someone is just out for revenge against the FBI."

"Then why name you?" Faith challenged. "Why threaten you?"

"They didn't threaten me," he retorted. "They told me I couldn't stop them from killing Gordon, which makes no sense at all since I didn't even know the man. It's just tripe, Faith. They're trying to scare you to throw you off the scent."

"David, please," Faith insisted. "Just take some time off."

David sighed and tapped his fingers a moment. Finally, he said, "Faith, I absolutely sympathize with your feelings right now, and I will do anything and everything I can to make this easier for you, but I can't just leave for... how long would I need to be gone anyway?"

"Until we catch him."

He sighed again. "Faith, the answer's no. I love you, but the answer's no."

Faith looked away from David, trying to keep tears from forming in her eyes. God, why did no one listen to her? Why did everyone assume she was just paranoid? She'd been right so many times! When were people going to stop treating her like a damned mental patient?

The uncomfortable recollection came to her that she'd been wrong a few times as well when it came to the Copycat Killer. That thought did nothing to ease her fear or her anger. The tears she fought so hard to stifle finally came.

"David, please," she said, wiping her eyes angrily. "I love you. You're the most important person in the world to me. I know you think I'm crazy, but—"

"Hey, hey," he interrupted. "I don't think you're crazy."

"Just listen!" she snapped. "I know you think I'm overreacting to this letter, but this is my job, David. It's my job to investigate murders and figure out what the people who commit those murders are thinking. As a professional, I am telling you that he wrote that note for me and that he threatened you. This is no less paranoid than if you examined

an animal and found cancer. I'm trained to analyze evidence the way you're trained to analyze medical conditions. Please believe me and get somewhere safe before it's too late."

He looked at her, and she could see in his eyes that he still didn't believe her. She pleaded silently for him to at least listen to her, to at least follow her advice.

Finally, he sighed. "All right. Look. I... I usually take two weeks off to visit my family for my birthday. I suppose I could take the two weeks early this year. My family lives in Nevada. Is that far enough?"

She ignored the jibe in his question and sighed with relief. "Yes. Thank you, David."

He forced a smile, and it hurt her that he had to force it, but it hurt less than him remaining in danger would have hurt. He made the hurt even easier when he said, "I'll leave tomorrow morning. You can spend the night so you can make sure I'm safe. Will that work?"

"Yes," she said, going to him and wrapping him in her arms. He held her close, and she breathed him in again.

Two weeks wasn't enough, not nearly enough, but she would make it work. She had caught other criminals faster than that, and she knew this killer, knew him as she knew no other killer. She would find him and stop him whether the Boss wanted her to or not.

Dr. West smiled kindly at Faith and his compassion seemed perfectly genuine when he asked her, "How are you feeling?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Not good," she said honestly.

"I don't blame you," he said, "I hear about Gordon. It's incredibly difficult to lose a friend, and to lose him the way you did is even more difficult. I'm so sorry."

She managed a brief smile. "Thank you."

“No need to thank me,” he said, “I never understood that social convention anyway. I’m not doing you a favor by expressing sorrow. Sorrow is a natural reaction to the loss of life.”

Faith had known far too many who felt the exact opposite of sorrow at the loss of life, but she only smiled and nodded in return.

“Well,” he said, “I had a different plan for this session, but in light of recent events, I think we should dispense with that and focus on the pain you’re feeling now. Is that all right with you?”

Faith nodded. She had come to trust Dr. West and value his advice. He was every bit as pedantic and, in many ways, just as annoying as she imagined a psychologist would be, but he was also genuinely concerned for her mental health, and she believed that he truly wanted her to heal.

“Good,” he said, then added, “Another word that truly has no place in this conversation.” He shook his head sympathetically and said, “Tell me how you feel, Faith.”

Faith didn’t answer right away. She couldn’t nail down exactly what she felt. She felt a lot of things at once, none of them good. She finally decided to just say what was on her mind without trying to organize it.

“I feel angry,” she said, “angry at the copycat killer for taking Gordon. Angry at myself for not being there to protect him—yes, I know it’s not my fault, but I still feel that way. Angry at the Boss for taking me off the case—”

“He took you off the case?” Dr. West interrupted. “Really.”

Faith nodded. “Yes. He feels that I’m too emotionally compromised after seeing the body.”

“You saw Gordon’s body?” Dr. West interrupted again. He leaned forward in his chair, eyes wide with amazement. “Were you the one to discover him?”

Faith nodded, a lump forming in her throat.

“Oh my,” Dr. West said, leaning back in his chair again. “That must have been horrible for you.”

“Yes,” Faith agreed, blinking back tears. “Yes, it was.”

“So the Boss feel you’re too emotionally compromised to handle this case? That’s interesting. What leads him to feel that way?”

She shrugged. “He thinks we’re all too close to it now. He thinks that part of the reason we’ve been unsuccessful in catching him is that we’re all too invested in it now. We’ve started taking it personally, and that’s why Gordon and Desrouleaux never caught him and why Desrouleaux and Chavez still haven’t. And, of course, with Gordon murdered, we’re all upset and not thinking straight.”

“Do you believe you’re not thinking straight?”

Faith shook her head. She had given that a lot of thought over the past few days. “No, I’m thinking clearly,” she said. “I’m angry, and I’m hurt, and I’m sad that Gordon is dead, but I’m thinking clearly. I can see now that this killer has been obsessed with me this entire time.”

Dr. West had reached for his water bottle while she answered. He paused with it halfway to his lips when she said that. “You believe he’s obsessed with you?”

Faith nodded. “It makes sense. The Donkey Killer—the original one—he very nearly killed me, but in the end, Michael saved me.”

Dr. West seemed shocked by that. “Michael?”

“Yes, Special Agent Prince. He stopped the Donkey Killer just before the Donkey Killer could make the final—before he could kill me. I think the Copycat Killer sees me as unfinished business. These other killings—they matter, but I think the point is to try to goad me into making the same mistake I made with the first Donkey Killer so he can get me alone and finish the job he started.”

“Michael Prince shot Jethro Trammell,” Dr. West mused.

Faith frowned. “Yes. Have I never told you that before?”

Dr. West had a faraway look in his eyes as he shook his head. “No, you haven’t.” He inhaled and refocused on Faith. “I apologize. That isn’t related to what we’re talking about. It’s

just a surprising detail. So you think he's trying to get to you, and that motivates all of his crimes? Please forgive me, Faith, but that *does* sound a little paranoid."

"I know," Faith said, "but he left a note with Gordon's body that was clearly directed to me."

Dr. West leaned forward again, his eyes bright with something that looked almost like excitement. "A note?"

"Yes."

She told him about the note, focusing on the use of her name and the allusions to Michael and David. When she finished, she said, "I really think he sees killing me as a sign that he's surpassed his idol. If he can kill the one that got away, so to speak, then he will be proven to be a better serial killer than the original Donkey Killer. I think that's his ultimate goal."

"Hmm," Doctor West said,

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You don't believe me," Faith said.

Dr. West took a deep breath and released it slowly. "Well," he said, "I don't disbelieve you. It's certainly common for serial killers to fixate on a particular individual. It's even common for serial killers to kill people around the focus of their fixation and save the target of their obsession for last. Sometimes they don't even kill their obsession at all."

Faith nodded, a little impatient. She knew all about profiling, and she didn't particularly want to have a philosophical discussion on serial killers in general right now. "But it's all a moot point anyway," she said. "I'm off the case."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Are you?"

What he was really asking was if she would abide by the Boss's decision to remove her from the case or if she would take matters into her own hands again.

She had no intention of staying off of the copycat case, but she didn't think it was a good idea for her to tell the psychologist assigned to her by the Boss himself what she

intended. Doctor-patient confidentiality was respected in the FBI, but that wouldn't prevent Dr. West from signing an order to have her removed from the field.

"Yes," she said. "I tried going cowboy once, and it didn't help anybody. I'll share my thoughts on the case with the New York office—" a lie but one she was confident Dr. West wouldn't follow up on "—and I'll focus on taking care of myself and my loved ones."

"That's a very wise and mature attitude to have, Faith," Dr. West replied with an encouraging smile. "So now that I know you're not going to do anything... inadvisable... we can turn to the subject of how to heal. What do—"

Before he could finish his question, Faith's phone buzzed. It was the Boss.

She had a sinking feeling she knew exactly what this call was. She answered reluctantly. "Yes?"

"Bold, get your ass over here. You have a case."

And just like that, all of Faith's plans crumbled to dust.

CHAPTER THREE

Turk barked for attention, and Michael reached down and ruffled his fur. “Hey, buddy,” he said. “How’s Mama? She stays out of trouble, or is she lying to me again?”

“Hey,” Faith retorted, “When have I ever lied to you?”

“Not enough time in the day to answer that question,” Michael quipped, straightening.

“How are you feeling?” he asked her.

“I’m all right,” she said, “I’m guessing the Boss is just trying to keep me occupied so I don’t do anything stupid.”

Michael shrugged. “Can you blame him?”

Faith sighed. “No, I guess not.”

She thought the Boss might be willing to give her a little extra time off, maybe the two weeks she needed to find and stop the Copycat Killer, but it looked like that wasn’t going to be the case. She could pretend that she was grieving and ask to be taken off of this case, but the Boss was almost certainly too suspicious to fall for that, especially after Faith’s past history where this case was concerned.

“Come on,” Michael said to Faith’s sour frown. “This’ll be good for you. Better than stewing at home all day.”

“I agree,” Faith said, not because she actually did agree, but because she was glad to have Michael out of harm’s way. Michael was a great detective, but he was a straightforward detective. He liked to follow breadcrumbs to logical conclusions. That worked a lot of the time, most of the time, even, but that didn’t work for a killer like the Copycat Killer. The Copycat Killer would—and Faith believed had—left false breadcrumbs to throw detectives like Clark and Desrouleaux off of the case. Clark and Desrouleaux were both like Michael, straightforward, logical thinkers. It would be easy for the Copycat Killer to lure Michael into a situation where he could get killed.

..

They walked into the Boss's office and were met with his typical sour frown. He nodded curtly at Faith, the closest she imagined he would come to acknowledging either of their grief.

They sat in the two chairs in front of the desk, and the Boss got straight to the point. "Goldwood, Arizona," he said. "A little town right on the border with California. Two dead so far. Torn apart by dogs."

Turk cocked his ears at that. Faith whistled. Michael swore. "Christ, we never get the simple ones, do we?"

"You want simple cases, go work for the police," the Boss retorted. "We do adult work here."

Faith suppressed a chuckle. Michael replied drily, "Glad to see you're your normal cheerful self again."

The Boss ignored him and said, "The first victim was killed hiking in a nature park just outside of town. The second was killed in an abandoned storage yard. The first victim looks like he never saw it coming. The second one definitely did. Defensive wounds on her arms and hands."

"Jesus," Michael said. "What a terrible way to go."

"You said two victims, sir?" Faith asked.

"Yes," the Boss confirmed. "Two victims."

"Forgive me, sir, but isn't the cutoff for FBI involvement three victims? And... well, are we sure these were murders? Coyotes could have killed the victim in the nature park, and guard dogs could have killed the victim at the construction yard. The company who owned the yard would be responsible for the death at the construction yard, but that would be a civil case, not a criminal one."

"The cutoff for mandatory FBI involvement is three victims," the Boss corrected. "You two have taken cases with fewer victims before, at least at the start of the case." Faith's lips thinned at the veiled insinuation as the Boss continued. "As far as if we're sure it's murder, it definitely wasn't coyotes at the nature park and that lot has been vacant for years."

“Still, sir,” Faith protested, “it seems like a leap to assume it’s murder. Unless there’s evidence we’re missing.”

“Well, the good news, Special Agent, is that you are highly qualified to find that missing evidence.”

Faith decided to avoid further protest. “What do we know about the victims?”

“First victim is Gerald Conway, 57. I liked to hike in the Sonora Nature Park. His body was found three days ago being picked apart by vultures.” Michael shuddered. “He was identified by his wedding ring.”

“Jesus,” Michael said softly. “I’m guessing not much evidence there.”

“Well, we know it was dogs and not coyotes,” the Boss replied. “Hopefully CSI in Goldwood will have more to tell you when you two arrive. The second victim might leave a little more for you to work with. Gigi Demetrious, 44. She was found last night.”

Faith’s skin crawled. Gigi had died—been torn apart, in fact—while she was in bed with David after trying to convince him to take steps to avoid the very same fate.

“Do the police have any leads?” Faith asked.

“No,” the Boss replied. “It seems these attacks were unprovoked, but there are no packs of feral dogs in the area, and a police search hasn’t turned any up.”

Now, it was beginning to sound like murder. It still wasn’t nearly enough to justify FBI intervention, though. The Boss was clearly just looking for an excuse to get Faith away from the Copycat Killer case. By the time she returned, the case would be firmly in the hands of the New York field office. That wouldn’t stop her from doing some investigating of her own, but for now, the better part of valor was patience. She would take this case and allow the Boss to believe he had been successful in circumventing her involvement.

“When do we fly?”

As expected, the Boss’s answer was, “Today. Your plane leaves in two hours. Pack warm clothing. Goldwood’s hotter

than Purgatory this time of year.”

“I thought Purgatory was cold,” Michael replied.

The Boss ignored the jibe, and Michael shrugged and followed Faith and Turk out of the office. When they were out of the building, Michael asked Faith, “Do you get the sense he’s just trying to make work for us?”

“That’s exactly what he’s doing,” Faith agreed, “but we saw this coming.”

“I saw it coming for *you*,” Michael countered. “Not me.”

“Ouch,” Faith replied drily. “Well, you’re my partner, so until you put in a request to change that, you have to suffer the consequences of my poor decisions.”

“Relax, Faith,” he replied. “I’m just grouching. You know I’ll do that anyway.”

“I know,” Faith says, “Sometimes I think the Boss doesn’t like you because you remind him of himself.”

Michael glared at Faith as he pulled his cell phone and dialed a number. A moment later, he said, “Hey, Ellie. Sorry, I have to cancel dinner tonight. Yeah, there’s a case.” He glanced at Turk. “I’ll tell you later.”

Ellie! Faith had forgotten about Ellie! Dammit, if the copycat killer knew about Michael, then he knew about Ellie too. If she was alone in her house, she would be vulnerable, and he could use that advantage to strike a blow at Michael.

“I know, I know,” Michael said, continuing his phone conversation. “I’ll make it up to you when I get home, okay? Love you.”

He hung up, and Faith immediately said, “Michael, we can’t leave Ellie by herself!”

He frowned. “What? Why?”

“Because the killer threatened her.”

He blinked in confusion. “What? What are you talking about?”

“In the note. He threatened to kill you and David.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Michael replied, “and anyway, Ellie’s not me *or* David.”

“Yes, but she’s close to you,” Faith countered, “and if he wants to get to you, hurting the person you love while you’re gone is a perfect way to throw you off of your game. He could use that to lure you into a position of vulnerability.” She considered something and added, “He might not even try to kill you. He might be satisfied just hurting you and taking your focus off of me for a little while.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, Faith,” Michael said with just a touch of irritation, “but my focus is already off of you.”

“I don’t mean your romantic focus,” Faith said irritably. “I mean your attention. You’re not glued to me twenty-four-seven, but having you in my life as someone I can rely on is important to me. He might be trying to sabotage that. He might plan to kill you, but if you leave him an easier target that will accomplish the same goal, he might settle for that instead.”

Michael pursed his lips. Faith braced herself for the irritating, condescending dismissal she was about to hear and reminded herself to remain calm.

“Faith, I’m not trying to diminish the way you feel,” he said, “but you need to take a step back from your emotions and look at this situation logically. The copycat killer has been active for two years. In that time, he’s not killed anyone close to you.”

“Gordon was close to me.”

“Gordon was the lead agent on his case for two years. He had a target on his back, a legitimate one. You may have had a target on your back when you were moonlighting on the case, but you haven’t worked his case in months. It’s very doubtful that he would consider you a threat to him. Besides, how do you know for sure that Gordon’s killer is the copycat?”

Faith stared incredulously at him. “Are you serious? Did you not read the note?”

“Faith, I could have written that note. You could have written that note. All of Philadelphia and half of the rest of the

country could have written that note. Everyone knows who the Copycat Killer is. Anyone could have used his name.”

“So you think someone randomly decided to use the Copycat Killer’s name and what just happened to make several lucky guesses about my personal life?”

“I think that a killer with a vendetta against the FBI killed an agent and threatened at least one, maybe two more. I think that this killer knew that the Copycat Killer is a thorn in the side of this field office and used the name to either throw us off the scent or taunt us. Probably both. I *don’t* think that the real Copycat Killer would have completely tossed his MO out the window. If it was the Copycat Killer, he would have kidnapped Gordon and treated him the way the Donkey Killer treated you. That would have sent a far more powerful message than a note.”

Faith could spend all afternoon listing the reasons why Michael was wrong, but she didn’t want to waste time debating. “Michael, we can have a heart-to-heart about this later, but please, as your friend, consider sending your girlfriend somewhere safe.”

“Faith, nowhere’s safe,” Michael replied. “People get murdered every day. There’s no magical land where murder doesn’t exist, and everyone lives in peace and harmony. When I took this job, I accepted the risks to myself and to my loved ones.”

His shoulders slumped and his eyes took on a haunted look when he said that. She hated seeing him like this, but she didn’t have any more time to deal with his trauma than she did to debate. “Some places are safer than others right now, Michael. David’s visiting his parents in Nevada right now. You, Turk, and I will be in Arizona. Ellie’s the last link, the last person that note threatens. If she’s gone, then the killer won’t chase her. This is his territory. He’ll wait for us to come back, and with you protecting Ellie and Turk protecting me, he’s far less likely to move on us.”

Michael sighed and shook his head. “I really think this is an overreaction, Faith. I love you, and I respect the hell out of

you, but let's be honest; you stop thinking clearly when it involves anything having to do with Trammell.”

“This isn't about Trammell, Michael!” Faith shouted, anger overriding her desire to remain calm. “This is about the copycat killer!”

“The killer who murdered Gordon didn't copy Trammell,” Michael pointed out. He sighed. “Look, Faith, I can't just uproot Ellie's life because you read a vague note and decided that it must mean a serial killer has a personal vendetta against you.”

Faith tried another tack. “Well, even if he isn't going to target Ellie personally, he's still a dangerous serial killer who likes to pick on people who are caught alone.”

“And that's a risk *every* human being on Earth accepts,” Michael retorted. “The copycat killer won't be the last serial killer in Philadelphia. Hell, he's probably not the only serial killer active there now. We can't spend our lives in fear, Faith, and I'm not going to make Ellie spend her life in fear because of... of this.”

Faith's shoulders tensed. She felt the tightness in her jaw that told her she was clenching her teeth before the pressure in her gums seconded the realization. “Michael, will you please do this for me? At least until you and I return from this case, will you please send Ellie somewhere safe?”

Michael didn't answer for a while. He stared at Faith, and she could see the indecision in his mind. She waited for that indecision to change to reluctant decision and released a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding when Michael said, “All right. Her sister's been begging us to visit her in Oklahoma City. I'll just tell Ellie to go by herself this time.”

“Thank you,” Faith said. “I'm sorry. I just—”

“It's fine,” Michael interrupted. His tone made it clear that it wasn't fine and equally clear that he had no intention of discussing the subject further. He emphasized the last part when he said, “I'll see you at the airport.”

Faith and Turk headed to Faith's car, a fifteen-year-old Crown Victoria Police Interceptor that recently replaced an

even older year of the same model. Turk watched her closely as they started home, sensing the tension in his handler's body.

Faith did some of the breathing exercises Doctor West had taught her, and by the time she reached her apartment, her knuckles no longer stood out white on her steering wheel. The anxiety didn't quite disappear, however, and it wasn't until she reached the airport and Michael confirmed that Ellie was leaving that night that she was able to relax completely.

CHAPTER FOUR

“You might get good use out of your K9 for this one. I’ve never seen anything like this in twenty-two years of law enforcement. It’s like something out of one of those crime shows.”

Deputy Sheriff Tom Watkins was around Michael’s age, but with considerably less hair and considerably more bulk. He greeted the three special agents with a look that contained the predictable equal helpings of respect and irritation.

More respect than irritation, however. The fear that lurked beneath the surface of his expression told Faith that he was secretly relieved to have this be someone else’s responsibility.

“We’ll help in any way we can,” Faith assured him. “Can you take us to the most recent crime scene, please?”

“You don’t want to get to your hotel first?” Tom asked.

“No, thank you,” she replied. “I like to look at the scene and the bodies as soon as possible while the evidence is still fresh. Once we look at the scene and talk to you and the coroner, we’ll head to the hotel.”

Tom offered a *suit yourself* shrug and gestured toward his car, a much newer Ford Police Interceptor, this one based on a midsize SUV. Faith couldn’t recall the name of the model. Her car was the newest model she’d ever driven, and even the utilitarian Crown Vic was a bit too fancy for her tastes.

Tom didn’t seem to share her distaste, quickly engaging his ventilated seats, climate control and satellite radio as the three agents settled into their seats, Michael in the front with Tom and Faith and Turk in the back.

Tom accelerated smoothly out of the airport, flashing his lights to clear a path through the civilian traffic. Faith didn’t approve of that practice and wondered what other rules Tom felt comfortable bending. It was all the same to her whether he

was a good person or not, but if he was cavalier with rules, then he would be cavalier with investigations, and that could mean that the sheriffs had already allowed a significant amount of evidence to be compromised.

“Used to live in Detroit when I was in high school,” Tom offered. “My parents split up when I was fourteen, and my Mom left Kentucky and ended up shacking up with a foreman at the Dodge plant out there. We used to see dogs all the time. Mangy little things, but if they caught an animal alone, they were absolutely vicious with it. Themselves too. I saw an old terrier break its ankle trying to leap a fence, and three or four dogs just tore it to pieces while it was still alive. Felt bad for the little guy.”

“I take it that’s not something you’ve seen here,” Michael probed.

Tom shook his head. “Not once. The residents have dogs, of course, and a few strays here and there, but nothing like Detroit, nothing that anyone would have to worry about.” He shook his head. “The people here are all freaked out about it. The mayor’s announced a curfew. No one outside after ten o’clock.”

“Have you made any progress on finding the animals responsible?” Faith asked.

Tom shook his head. “Animal control’s looking, but the residents here aren’t much for government prying into their lives. We bleed red here, as the saying goes.”

Faith hadn’t heard that saying before, but she understood his point. “So you’ve ruled out the possibility of wild animals?”

He shrugged. “Couple people suggested coyotes—” he pronounced the word kye-oats, another nod to his southern upbringing—“but I have a hard time believing that. I heard about that nurse who got mauled up in Colorado, but the coyotes here have plenty of wild prey. They don’t need to be looking for humans to eat. I just don’t see them showing up and deciding to maul us out of nowhere.”

That was probably a safe assumption. “And the residents aren’t cooperating with the search?”

“They’re cooperating well enough,” Tom replied. “They’re just not making it easy. They want signed affidavits, warrants, all that stuff. The judge is doing a great job keeping up, but there are thirty-five-thousand people here and damn near every one of them owns dogs. We won’t find our killer in time if we’re grid-searching houses and interrogating every Rottweiler we see.”

His frustration showed in his demeanor and word choice. It was another sign of impatience. Faith could understand impatience, but she knew from personal experience that, understandable or not, impatience could destroy an investigation.

Tom drove them to an industrial neighborhood a few miles from Goldwood’s center. The street was lined on either side with lots in various stages of use ranging from active service to hadn’t been touched in thirty years.

The lot he parked in front of fit somewhere in the middle of those two extremes. It was clearly abandoned, with several of its raw materials plundered through various holes cut into the chainlink fence, but the heavy equipment looked close enough to running order that it must have been used fairly recently, relatively speaking.

“Who owns the lot?” she asked.

“Fremantle Construction,” he replied. “They’ve denied involvement, of course. They’re doing their damndest to deny liability, too, but they’ll end up settling with the family.”

He led them into the scene and walked them past piles of cinderblocks, red bricks and steel beams that resembled railroad rails. Every now and then, a backhoe or bulldozer would show up in between the raw goods. Faith kept her eye on the ground, looking for a sign of footprints other than their own, but she didn’t find anything until they rounded the corner of a large warehouse that occupied the center of the lot.

Turk growled low in his throat, his sensitive nose picking up the scent of the dogs before Faith saw the footprints. They

had degraded considerably, enough that she couldn't tell much about the dogs by looking at them, but they were clearly dog footprints and clearly more than one.

"The body was found here," Tom said, pointing a few dozen yards away at a portion of the fence. The ground was stained dark brown in front of the fence and flies coated a few patches of sticky liquid that Faith knew was blood.

"The coroner will be able to give you more details about her injuries," Tom said, "but she was found here last night or rather very early this morning, just after two a.m. She was essentially torn to pieces. Her face, miraculously, was decent enough we could ID her, but the rest was as mangled as you would expect it to be."

"Did she have a reason to be here?" Michael asked.

Tom shrugged. "I can't imagine what that reason might be. Teens sometimes come here to drink or smoke weed, but if she wanted a toke or a private drink, there are a hell of a lot of places better suited to that, so I doubt she was looking to get high, although I guess the tox screen will tell us that."

Faith recalled a recent case in Washington, D.C., where the killer used a cocktail of exotic drugs to paralyze and then kill his victims. None of the drugs had shown up on the tox screen then either. She didn't air her concern to Tom, though.

Turk sniffed around, poking his nose into the blood stains and trotting along the path marked by the dogs' footprints. Michael took his phone out and started taking pictures, leaving Faith alone with Tom.

"No witnesses?" she asked.

He chuckled with more than a hint of bitterness. "No one comes out here," he said. "The big construction companies—the ones that own the actively used lots you saw up the street—close their buildings at six and stay closed until nine."

"Every office building has night security," Faith replied. "Maybe one of them saw something."

Tom shrugged, evidently his most predominant tic. "You can ask them if you want," he said, "but they didn't see anything when they talked to us."

Michael returned to them. Faith lifted an eyebrow, and he shook his head. He hadn't found anything.

Turk was equally confused, walking around and sniffing aimlessly.

"It's all right, Turk," Faith called. "Let it go." As the dog trotted over to her, she said to Tom, "Can you take us to the coroner's office, please?"

"Sure thing," Tom replied. "Place gives me the creeps anyway."

Michael glanced back at Faith in the back seat. She offered him a brief smile, then turned her attention back out of her window at the passing streetlights. Michael turned back around in his seat, ignoring a knowing half-smile from Tom.

He was worried about Faith. He knew better than anyone how much of a toll the original Donkey Killer had taken on her. She had walked a fine line between professional interest and paranoia the moment she learned about the Copycat Killer, and it had nearly cost her job, and—Michael hated to admit—her friendship with him when her paranoia extended to Ellie.

For a while, she seemed to be getting better. Her sessions with this Doctor West seemed to be helping her gain perspective on her suffering and find a way to process the pain she'd gone through. She was smiling again, and even managed to step away from the case, though privately Michael wondered if that had more to do with Gordon watching her like a hawk once the Boss assigned him as Faith's supervisor.

Gordon.

Michael's lips thinned slightly. He and Gordon hadn't been especially close, but any time an agent was killed, it was like losing a family member. He had been just as ready as Faith to launch a full-scale assault on the person responsible, but a night's sleep brought clarity to him, and he realized the Boss's

decision to transfer the case away from people too close to it emotionally was the right one.

But did Faith realize that?

She was getting paranoid again. He didn't want to believe it, but the evidence was right there in front of his face. She had sent David away to stay with family and had goaded Michael into doing the same with Ellie.

And he had gone along with it. Part of him wished he had stood his ground a little more, but that would only have meant Faith went to talk to Ellie herself, and he definitely didn't want that. The two women were already on less-than-agreeable terms after Turk had behaved with surprising hostility toward Ellie the first time they met. If Faith showed up at the house ranting and raving about a note and a veiled threat to everyone Faith loved, Ellie would have locked the doors and windows and immediately called the police.

He tried to stamp out the next thought before it reached his conscious mind, but he didn't quite make it.

Maybe it would be better for Faith to take some time off.

He shook his head. That wasn't the solution. They had tried putting Faith on leave before, and she had simply worked under the radar.

An even more uncomfortable thought wormed its way in.
Maybe it would be better for Faith to leave.

He hated that he was even considering that possibility, but the evidence was not working in Faith's favor. She was creating shadows to jump at now. Her obsession with the copycat killer case had affected her judgment before, and all signs suggested it was having the same effect now.

He wasn't angry at Faith, only worried. She had suffered so much. She hated to think that he was suffering more. Maybe it really *would* be better for her to move on before the job broke her Tiff.

"We're here," Tom replied, pulling the SUV to a stop. "If you two don't mind, I'm going to leave you here. I've had a long day, and I'm not much of a night owl. I'll have them leave you a cruiser you can borrow while you're out here."

“Thank you,” Michael replied. “And thank you for the ride.”

“Anytime.”

The coroner’s office was located in Goldwood SD’s headquarters, a typical red-brick box in the style Michael thought of as Desert Plain. It was three stories tall, but the coroner’s facilities shared the basement with records and the evidence locker. Tom waved a goodbye and headed to his personal vehicle, which was, not surprisingly, an old Chevy pickup.

The coroner was a neatly groomed man in his early forties with a medium build, bright blue eyes and hair that was rapidly turning more gray than blonde. He shook the two agents’ hands and introduced himself as Dr. Hiram Jensen.

“We’re all very grateful to have you here,” he said in a gently cultured voice.

Michael wondered why it was that so many coroners and funeral home directors were softspoken. Maybe they were trained to be so they could effectively handle interactions with family members.

He led the three agents to the morgue. “We typically don’t allow dogs in the morgue,” he mentioned to Faith, “but as this dog is a trained K9 unit, I’ll make an exception. Maybe he can glean something that I haven’t.”

“So you don’t have any leads?” Faith asked.

Dr. Jensen shook his head. “I’m afraid I’ll have very little to tell you that the sheriff hasn’t already explained.”

He opened two drawers and lifted the sheets covering the bodies. One body, Gerald’s, was a mess. Holes and divots where the vultures and other scavengers had picked at the corpse covered the body like open sores. The eyes were both gone and the lips were left in tatters, as were the ears and other, more sensitive places.

“Good-looking guy,” Michael quipped, earning a glare from Faith.

The other body was in bad shape, too. Multiple rows of sutures indicated where Dr. Jensen had reattached limbs and skin. It looked like something out of an old zombie movie.

She. *She* looked like something out of an old zombie movie.

It didn't feel better to think of things that way, but one of Michael's old mentors had told him that the moment you started thinking of victims as "the victim" and not by their own name, you start losing your humanity.

"Mrs. Demetrious is the more recent of the victims," Dr. Jensen explained, "and it's clear that she tried to defend herself." He lifted Gigi's left arm, revealing a mangled mass of flesh that no amount of talent could fix. "Her right arm is the same. These wounds occurred before death, obviously, as did several of the wounds to her thighs and abdomen. The fatal wound was delivered to the throat." He pointed out a roughly ovoid section of sutures that straddled Gigi's neck. "That dog, at least, was big, probably a Rottweiler."

"How many dogs are we looking at?" Michael asked.

"Eight so far," Dr. Jensen replied. "Ranging in size from a medium-sized terrier to a large mastiff breed. Interestingly, only four of the dogs share commonality with both victims. The other four show up only on one of the victims but not both."

"The same number of dogs for each victim, though?" Michael asked.

"That's hard to tell for sure. The bodies, as you can see, are in pretty bad shape. I can tell you what I see, but there's a lot I can't see."

"And no sign of human interaction with the corpses?" Faith asked.

"None," the coroner replied.

"Have loved ones been notified?" Faith asked.

Dr. Jensen nodded. "Mrs. Conway three days ago, and Miss Demetrious's daughter this morning when the body was recovered."

“How did the daughter seem to you?” Michael asked.

Dr. Jensen shrugged. “To me, she seemed in shock. I’m not a detective, though. That question might be better left for Deputy Watkins.”

“What about the bites?” Faith asked. “You’re sure that they couldn’t have come from coyotes?”

Dr. Jensen pursed his lips. “It’s possible. My instinct tells me no, but coyotes do differ in morphology between individuals. I’ve never seen it to this extreme degree before, but it’s possible.”

“We’ll follow up,” Michael replied. “Thank you for your time, Doctor.”

Dr. Jensen accepted the offered hand. Faith said her own goodbyes, and the two of them left. They stopped by the desk sergeant and got the keys to one of the cruisers along with Deputy Watkins’ disturbingly slim file on the case.

The hotel was one of the nicer versions of motels that had been in existence seemingly since the dawn of the automobile. Michael approached a stoic-looking woman of indeterminate middle age and asked for two singles.

The woman looked between the two agents, seemingly surprised by the request. “Ain’t got two singles,” she said, “but I have a double queen with a walk-in closet.”

Michael pursed his lips. In a recent argument, Ellie had pointed out her discomfort with the fact that Michael shared rooms with Faith while they were on cases. He had committed to getting separate rooms since, even after Ellie apologized for her outburst.

Faith noticed his discomfort. “I can look for a room at the other motel down the road,” she offered. “We can meet at one of the cafés in the morning.”

“No, it’s fine,” Michael said, handing the stoic woman his Bureau credit card. “Ellie isn’t worried about that anymore.”

The stoic woman lifted an eyebrow but didn’t say anything. Michael didn’t bother correcting her obvious suspicions. She

handed them each a keycard, then looked down and seemed to see Turk for the first time.

“Dog’s an extra twenty a night,” she said, “No charge if you tie him up outside.”

Michael placed a twenty on the table and smiled. “Thank you.”

The woman didn’t return his smile and said nothing else as the three agents left the lobby and headed to their room. Faith dropped her bag on the floor near the room’s one window and informed Michael she was going to shower.

Maybe it was just the uncomfortable memory of his argument with Ellie, but Michael felt his thoughts drift a little too close to imagining Faith naked in the shower.

He had convinced Ellie that he had no more romantic feelings for Faith and saw her only as a friend. Now he was wondering if she still shampooed first and washed her body later. Could Ellie have been right to worry? He had no plans of cheating on her, but thinking about Faith at all in this way concerned him. Maybe he should have allowed Faith to room at the other motel.

He sighed heavily and kicked his shoes off, then plopped onto his side of the bed and switched the tv on. He would shower in the morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Genevieve was on her phone when the agents arrived. She looked contemptuously at Turk and asked, “That dog’s not going to shit on our floor, is he?”

Gigi Demetrious lived with her daughter, Genevieve, and her mother, Olivia, in a large, well-appointed two-story home in the Rolling Hills Estates in the extreme northeast corner of Goldwood, the opposite side of town from where Gigi’s body was found. Both women appeared to be carbon copies of Gigi, Genevieve, a younger version, and Olivia, an older version. Neither woman seemed all that upset at Gigi’s death.

Upon being reassured that Turk was, in fact, housetrained, she returned promptly to her phone and put on the expression of practiced boredom Faith associated with the plastic women whose insecurity demanded that they make it clear to everyone how bored they were with everyone and everything around them.

Olivia was somewhat less haughty but still looked down her nose at Michael and Faith, as though she were doing them a great favor by speaking to them.

“I assume you’re here to ask me about Gigi,” she said in a regal tone.

“Yes,” Faith said, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Genevieve scoffed at that. Olivia nodded with the barest politeness.

Faith and Michael shared a look. Then Faith began. “When was the last time either of you saw Gigi?”

“The morning of her death,” Olivia replied. “She was here for breakfast, as she was every morning, then she left for work.”

She said the last word as though it was a dirty word.

“What did she do for work?” Faith asked.

“She owned a clothing boutique in Goldwood. *Le Courtesan*. I imagine you can deduce what sort of apparel she sold.”

Faith could and could also deduce Olivia’s disapproval of her daughter’s line of work. Then again, maybe it was the idea of work in general that disgusted her.

“Did she seem different to you in any way?” Faith asked, “more irritable than normal? Aloof, anxious?”

“My daughter was not an anxious woman, officer,” Olivia replied.

Faith decided it would be a waste of time to remind Olivia that she was a special agent and not an officer. “And you noticed nothing out of the ordinary?”

“No.”

Faith turned to Genevieve, who held her phone up and posed, her facial expression never changing. Before the end of the interview, she would no doubt post that picture with a caption that said something about peace or serenity.

“What about you?” she asked.

Genevieve didn’t answer. Olivia watched, bemused, as the younger woman proceeded to snap several more pictures of herself.

Michael reached forward and snatched the phone from Genevieve’s hand. Genevieve stiffened and regarded Michael the way one might regard a fresh stain on their carpet. “Excuse you,” she snapped.

“My partner was just asking if you noticed anything out of the ordinary the morning before your mother was ripped apart by dogs,” Michael said.

Faith shot him a warning glance. She understood his frustration, but now was not the time for them to lose their cool.

“No,” Genevieve said irritably. “Can I have my phone back now?”

“No,” Michael replied. “We’re interviewing you about your mother’s death.”

“Well, *I* didn’t kill her!”

“It doesn’t seem to bother you much that she’s dead,” Faith said, “Either of you.”

Genevieve rolled her eyes and plopped back on the couch. “Well, I’m sorry. Do you want me to cry or something?”

Michael leaned forward, offering a hard smile that stopped well before his eyes. “If it will make things easier, Miss Demetrious, we can have this conversation at the sheriff’s station.”

“That won’t be necessary, officer,” Olivia interrupted. “My granddaughter is very upset at her mother’s death, as you can clearly see.”

“We can’t see it,” Faith said. When Olivia cast her an offended look, she added, “and we’re not concerned with politeness or etiquette. To repeat my partner’s point, if we don’t feel we’ve learned what we need from this interview, we may opt to continue this conversation at the station,” she turned to Genevieve, “where we can talk free of distractions.”

Olivia’s lips thinned in disapproval. Genevieve sighed loudly and rolled her eyes again. “Okay, look, Mom was a bitch, all right? If you think Grandma and I are tough to deal with, you should have seen her. It was always about her. Always. When I heard she was dead, I don’t know, I guess I just didn’t care. I didn’t kill her, all right? Neither did Grandma. We have security cameras all over the house. You can see that we stayed home all night. Happy?”

“We’ll look at that footage,” Michael said, “and for now, we’ll give you both the benefit of the doubt. I’d like to know why you considered your mom a bitch.”

“I told you,” Genevieve said irritably. “It was always about her. If I had a problem, she had a bigger one. If I needed help, I was being annoying. If I was upset about something, I was ruining her good vibes. She didn’t care about anyone but herself, and no one cares enough about her to be upset that she’s gone. She left me her house and money, and it was the only nice thing she ever did for me. So I’m sorry that I’m not

weeping uncontrollably, but I'm just not all that upset that the bitch is dead, now can I please have my fucking phone?"

"Language, Genevieve!" Olivia exclaimed.

Genevieve rolled her eyes and fell silent.

Olivia turned back to the agents. "I apologize for my granddaughter's outburst. I'm afraid she's correct. My Gigi was a poor mother. She loved Genevieve with all her heart, but I'm afraid she lacked a certain quality that allowed her the patience to raise a child. I think she only had poor Genevieve to try to please her husband. I'm afraid that didn't work out."

Genevieve's shoulders tensed very slightly at her grandmother's announcement. Faith decided she needed to have a one-on-one talk with her, but first, she needed a little more info from Olivia "Where is her ex-husband?" Faith asked.

"Charles? Oh, he died a long time ago. When Genevieve was eleven. She never knew him. He left Gigi three weeks after she was born. Good riddance. I always told Gigi that nothing good could come from marrying a Scandinavian."

Faith fought the urge to curl her lips in disgust. Olivia was the worst example of her generation, a bitter relic of the most revolting aspects of her time. Faith found herself almost hoping Olivia had something to do with the murder just so she could have the pleasure of seeing her carted off to jail.

"I think we'll make more progress if we interview the two of you separately," Faith said. "Miss Genevieve, you'll come with me."

"Can the dog stay here? This is a four-thousand-dollar dress. I don't want him getting fur or drool on it."

Faith glanced at Turk, who seemed to have no desire at all to get close to Genevieve. He fixed a look of exasperation on Faith, and Faith shrugged. "He'll stay with Michael and your grandmother."

"Fine," Genevieve said, standing and stalking away.

Faith shared another look with Michael, then followed Genevieve. The younger woman led her to the back of the

house, then out into a spacious backyard dominated by a swimming pool fed by a rock-lined waterfall. She walked to a pair of lawn chairs and draped herself over one with the practiced ease of someone used to being watched. “Can we talk here?” she asked, a rather unnecessary request since she’d already sat. “I haven’t gotten any sun today, and I feel drained.”

“Here’s fine,” Faith said, sitting on the edge of the other lawn chair.

She waited silently for Genevieve to speak. If she was correct, Genevieve had more to say but would close up like an oyster if prodded. If left alone, maybe she would open up, just a little.

After a few minutes, Genevieve turned her head lazily and regarded Faith with a gaze that seemed to be intended to be contemptuous but succeeded only in being vulnerable and afraid of opening up. Faith continued to wait, and when Genevieve evidently decided that she could trust Faith not to belittle her, she spoke.

“Mom was hard to love. I know you want to know who I think might want her dead. The answer is probably everyone who met her. I don’t think I ever heard her say I love you and mean it. She definitely never said it to me.”

“I’m sorry,” Faith said.

Genevieve shrugged with practiced carelessness. “It is what it is. I got over it by ninth grade. If she didn’t want to love me, that was fine. I didn’t have to love her.”

Faith was silent a moment as she allowed that admission to sink in. Then she asked, “Did your mother have a boyfriend that you know of?”

Genevieve chuckled. “Boyfriend? No. I don’t think Mom cared at all about sex, and if she married someone, she might be expected to pay attention to him.”

A tear welled in the corner of the young woman’s eye. She stared up at the sky and didn’t seem to notice it was there.

“Do you have any idea what your mother was doing in the industrial park on the opposite side of town last night?” Faith

asked.

Genevieve shrugged again and shook her head. “I never understood why Mom did anything. Sometimes I think she would just do whatever came first to her mind to fill the days.”

“I thought you said she was invested in her business.”

“She liked owning a business. She didn’t like running it. She didn’t like doing anything but listen to other people treat her like a queen.”

“So you don’t know why your mom might have been in the industrial park two nights ago?”

Genevieve sighed. “No.” She turned to Faith, and there were two clear tracks down her cheeks. “I’m sorry I can’t help you more. Mom and I were more like roommates for the past few years.”

Faith *was* a little disappointed at the lack of useful information she got from her, but she was gentle in her response. “Genevieve, I really am sorry for your loss.”

Genevieve smiled bitterly. “Don’t be. I never had anything to lose in the first place.”

In the car, Faith asked Michael if he learned anything useful.

“Other than that the whole family is a piece of work?” he said, “not much. Olivia shared that Gigi wasn’t well-liked, but we got that point pretty clearly from the first part of the interview. She then spent the rest of the interview talking about how she detested Goldwood and wished they had remained in Charleston.”

“Lovely,” Faith said.

“Anything from Kid Bitchy?”

Faith cast him a reproachful glance. “She just lost her mother, Michael.”

“She seems really broken up about it,” Michael replied sarcastically.

“She is,” Faith insisted. She might not show it, but she’s very upset at her mother’s death. I believe that Gigi was cold to her, but she’s an orphan now. She has no one left but her grandmother, and she didn’t seem the easiest woman to get along with.”

“Neither of them were,” Michael replied.

Faith let the argument drop. “We’ll call Tom and get him to send detectives to Le Courtesan to interview the employees.”

Michael frowned at her. “What are we gonna do?”

“I want to talk to Gerald Conway’s wife,” Faith said. “I want to see if he was as much of a ‘piece of work’ as Gigi Demetrious.”

“You think they were murdered for being assholes?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

Michael shrugged. “Fair enough.”

Faith called Tom while Michael drove to the nearby and equally egregious Tropical Garden Villas. Gerald Conway’s home was smaller and less opulent than Gigi Demetrious’s but was still far larger and more well-appointed than an average home. His money, evidently, was spent on toys. Two different Mercedes sedans sat in the four-car driveway. The other two spaces were taken by a trailer with two jetskis and a twenty-foot boat.

Jeanie Conway opened the door on the second ring. Her eyes were red and puffy, and Faith felt a touch of sympathy for her.

“You’re here to talk about Gerald,” she said.

“Yes,” Faith said. “I’m Special Agent Faith Bold and this is my partner, Special Agent Michael Prince and our K9 unit, Turk.”

Turk barked formally and trotted forward to greet Jeanie. She smiled faintly and reached down to ruffle his neck. “Well, you better come inside. I don’t drink coffee, but I can boil

some water for tea if you'd like. I'm having some either way, so don't hold back on my account."

After the previous interview, Jeanie Conway was refreshing to talk to. She led Faith and Michael to the living room and gestured for them to sit on the opulent leather couch. She disappeared into the kitchen and returned a moment later with a tea service.

Michael accepted his tea gratefully. The motel didn't have a coffeemaker, and the agents hadn't stopped for coffee on the way to Gigi's house. "Thank you, Mrs. Conway."

"You're welcome, agent," Jeanie said.

She sat across from the agents and sipped her own tea before staring pensively ahead. Faith waited patiently for her to speak first.

Jeanie blinked as though suddenly remembering something. "Do you need my alibi? For the night of Gerald's death?"

Faith looked at Turk, who had curled contentedly at Jeanie's feet. She was convinced the older woman wasn't a murderer, but she decided it wouldn't hurt to be by the book.

"I'm afraid so," she replied. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all," Jeanie said. "I was in Laughlin that entire week. I have pictures of myself playing Bingo the night he died. My lawyer suggested I obtain proof of my whereabouts in case the sheriff's suspected me."

"Have you spoken with the sheriffs?" Faith asked.

"Not since the first interview the day after Gerald's death. They didn't seem to suspect me. I'm afraid I had very little to tell them or you, but I'll answer any questions I can."

Faith nodded. "Can you tell me the last time you saw your husband?"

"Two days before his death," she replied, "when I left for Laughlin." Her face darkened slightly. "I'm afraid we fought rather badly."

Michael lifted an eyebrow. "May I ask why?"

Jeanie smiled thinly and a little bitterly. “I had an affair some years ago with a business partner of his. We broke things off mutually when Gerald learned of the affair, but Gerald wasn’t really the forgiving type. I suppose I can’t blame him, though. I never forgave him for his affairs.”

Faith could see why Jeanie’s lawyer advised her to obtain proof of her alibi. “So your marriage was... troubled?”

“Our marriage was the excuse we used to justify our stagnation,” Jeanie replied. “We fell out of love decades ago. We stayed because we didn’t want to go through the hassle of divorce.”

“But you were both upset at the other’s affairs,” Michael pointed out. “Why get angry if you didn’t love each other anymore?”

“Pride,” Jeanie said simply. “That was the one comfort we both held onto. I wasn’t angry at him for sleeping with those other women because I felt I had lost his love but because I hated the idea of some pretty little tart giggling with him about how much better she was in bed. He said explicitly that it revolted him to think of me comparing his size with Harold.”

Faith and Michael glanced at each other. “Does Harold live nearby?”

Jeanie offered another thin smile. “He did. He died five years ago.”

Faith sighed. “I see. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“But it wasn’t really *my* loss, was it?” Jeanie pointed out. “Not Harold anyway.”

“So you and Gerald fought the morning you left. Did he seem particularly upset or out of sorts to you? Argument aside.”

Jeanie chuckled. “No, he was his usual pompous self. I didn’t notice any change in behavior at all. Not in thirty-five years together.” She sipped her tea and continued. “When I met him, I was knocked head over heels by that arrogance. I suppose many girls are foolish that way. But no, I noticed nothing that would have suggested to me that my last words to him would have been spiteful.”

Her lower lip trembled for a brief moment when she said that, and Faith felt a flash of sympathy for her. She recalled something she read once, that familiarity was a stronger bond even than love. Gigi Demetrious may have been a horrible mother and Jeanie and Gerald Conway may have suffered a terrible marriage, but both had lost a main pillar of their lives.

“Did your husband have any enemies who might have wanted him dead?” Faith asked gently.

Jeanie offered another bitter smile. “Many people aren’t sorry to see him gone,” she replied, “but no one hated him enough to have him torn apart by dogs. Well, maybe the dogs. Gerald was never a dog person. We had a dog and fought constantly over it. Still, as much of an asshole as he could be, he didn’t deserve such a brutal end.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Faith said.

Jeanie sighed. “People lose things every day, agent. The world goes on.”

CHAPTER SIX

Faith crouched down to examine the footprints. There were only a few remaining, but they were left in mud that hardened the next day, preserving the outline clearly.

Coyotes.

“Well, those are for sure coyote prints,” Tom confirmed, standing over her. “Bite marks might show that dogs were a part of it, but there were coyotes involved for sure.”

Faith stood and looked down the trail where Turk looked for a scent to follow under Michael’s supervision. “It’s possible that the coyotes arrived after the dogs left,” she said, “if there were large dogs involved, they would have waited for the dogs to leave before they ate the scraps.”

“That could be true, Special Agent,” Tom replied, “but when you hear hoofbeats, you don’t think water buffalo.”

“Fair point,” Faith conceded.

Very little remained of the crime scene five days after Gerald’s death. The blood itself had been licked clean by animals. Nature was cold and cruel, and there was no sanctity in death. Aside from the footprints and a bit of disturbed ground where Gerald had tried to flee his attackers, there was nothing to indicate that a man had died here less than a week ago.

“So both of our victims were assholes,” Tom thought aloud. “I guess in a way their end is poetic justice.”

“Murder isn’t justice, Sheriff,” Faith said curtly.

Tom shrugged. “Maybe not to you or I, but our killer might see things differently.”

Faith was taken aback slightly at his response. He was right. She had been focusing on her judgment of Tom’s cavalier attitude and had completely missed the wisdom of his statement. “Good point,” she said. “So we’re looking for someone taking justice into their own hands.”

He shrugged again. "I still think we have a fair chance of looking at a wild animal, but if it is a human-engineered death, then I imagine whoever did this felt perfectly justified in killing his victims. One thing I don't understand is why he killed them so far apart."

"Maybe they were killings of opportunity," Faith said. "Gerald liked to hike in this park."

"Gigi Demetrious almost certainly didn't enjoy nighttime excursions to an abandoned industrial lot," Tom countered.

"It's possible that he killed Gerald spur of the moment," Faith said. "First victims usually differ slightly from later victims. The killer hasn't perfected his or her M.O. That's why the first victim is usually the most important to an investigation."

"Too bad our first victim left us almost nothing to go on."

Faith nodded agreement. "Yeah. Our killer might have been better off keeping his murders out of town."

Michael and Turk returned then. "Nothing," Michael said. "Not that I expected anything. Turk did his best, but there are animals all over the place out here. I can't imagine he'd have any luck finding the exact coyotes who killed Gerald."

"We should ask local residents and see if they've seen anything," Tom replied.

"The nearest residents are miles away," Faith reminded him.

"There's a neighborhood two miles from where we're standing," Tom said, pointing at a collection of houses on a hillside to the west. "They could have seen something. And the night watchmen in the industrial park might have seen something. It's a long shot, but it's better than no shot. And if it *is* wild animals, then we need to start thinking about a more coordinated response."

Faith had to admit he was right. She was not a believer in the efficacy of canvassing, but she had no leads to work on. The sheriff's department hadn't come up with anything from Gigi's employees and Gerald's business partners were more concerned with who would buy out Gerald's share than the

fact he was dead or who might have caused it. They all had alibis for the nights of the murders too.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s ask around.”

They started in the subdivision overlooking the park. No one had seen Gerald the night of his death, but several reported seeing coyotes approach uncomfortably close to the neighborhood. One resident expressed her concern—or rather insisted—that the sheriff’s department wasn’t doing enough to protect people from the coyotes and wondered aloud why they hadn’t yet been exterminated.

The situation was the same in the industrial park. Coyotes were occasionally seen around the park, particularly in the abandoned lots where they liked to hunt rodents that sheltered in the piles of raw materials and abandoned machinery, but recent weeks had seen an uptick in activity. One guard shared that he had to brandish his nightstick to scare off a particularly bold animal.

Faith hated to admit it, but the possibility that it was coyotes, after all, was starting to seem more likely.

“Not possible,” Michael said, shaking his head. “The bite marks were all the wrong size for coyotes. Unless Dr. Jensen is horrifically incompetent, a pack of different-sized dogs killed our victims.”

“Or a pack of different-sized coyotes,” Faith pointed out.

“Not the same,” Michael replied. “The dentition is different.”

“The what?”

“The bite patterns. I looked it up over lunch.”

Faith sighed. “Noted,” she said. “What do we do then?”

“Well, I’m not saying we don’t look into the coyote angle,” Michael replied. “I’m not an expert, after all. I’m just saying we don’t abandon the idea that dogs were involved too. Whether or not the dogs were operating under the influence of a human shot-caller is another question.”

They fell silent a moment, each considering where to proceed.

“We could stake out likely hotspots,” Tom suggested. “The industrial park, the nature preserve, the sports complex; anywhere on the outskirts of town with low population concentrations and plenty of cover near wide open spaces.”

Faith sighed and shook her head. She felt like she was in a bad procedural show. Grid-searches and now stakeouts. Next, she would be in a high-speed car chase while Michael shot through the passenger window.

But she didn't have any better ideas. “All right,” she said. “Michael, Turk and I will take the industrial park. I want you to stake out the nature park. You can assign your deputies wherever you'd like, but I want us on the two known crime scenes. Carnivores tend to frequent the same hunting grounds, so if there really is a pack of coyotes or wild dogs killing people, they'll return to where they were successful before.”

“Works for me,” Tom responded. “I'll let you know if we find anything.”

“Same here.”

He left, and Faith and Michael shared a look. “This is bullshit,” Faith said.

“Yes,” Michael agreed. “Makes me long for the days when our killer would use a good, old-fashioned murder weapon like an exotic cocktail of poisons or a syringe of industrial strength detergent.”

Faith and Michael waited on top of the warehouse in the middle of the construction lot where two days prior, Gigi Demetrious had been eaten alive. They wore night-vision goggles to keep light pollution to a minimum. Turk saw clearly without the visual enhancement and lay next to Faith, ears turned to pick up any sound from the park.

Silence. Faith sighed and turned to Michael, who gazed stoically ahead. She risked a whisper. “I think we should try to see if there's a connection between the two victims.”

“We already interviewed their employees and coworkers,” Michael replied, “and their families. No one in either circle knew the other.”

“Maybe Gerald was sleeping with her,” Faith offered. “It’s a stretch, but everything right now is.”

Michael shook his head. “I feel like someone would have known something about that.”

“Then something else,” Faith insisted. “They have to be related somehow.”

“That’s not true, and you know it,” Michael countered. “None of Kenneth Langeveldt’s victims were related. The only thing that connected them was that they bore a very superficial resemblance to the family he murdered when he was a teenager. The fact that Gerald and Gigi were both assholes may be all of the connection we get, and anyone we know of who might have a reason to act on that assholishness has an alibi.”

Turk stood suddenly, ears cocked forward. Michael and Faith tensed and turned to watch the central courtyard where Turk gazed.

A rat trundled into the courtyard, its body engorged with a recent feast. It made it halfway across the courtyard before an owl swooped silently down and grasped it, its talons crushing the life out of the rodent before it could cry out.

Faith and Michael looked at each other. “Well, that was creepy as hell,” Michael said.

“Not helpful to us, though,” Faith said.

“Still creepy.”

They resumed their silent vigil. Faith’s thoughts began to turn after a while to the Copycat Killer case. She began to wonder who could know her well enough to have such intimate details of her life. She didn’t like the implication. Faith was a private person. She had no friends outside of the Bureau other than David. That left a very short and very disturbing list of people who might know enough about her to threaten the people she loved by name.

Months ago, she had suspected Gordon Clark of being the Copycat killer, basing her suspicion on Gordon's seemingly preternatural ability to end up wherever Faith was when she was investigating the murders and on Turk's violent reaction when he first met Gordon. She had verified that Gordon couldn't possibly have been the killer long before his death at the hands of the real killer, but that didn't mean that no one at the Bureau was responsible.

Who, though? And if not the Bureau, who else? The only people who knew enough about her to threaten her like that were David and Doctor West. Doctor West had a busy schedule—too busy for him to moonlight as a serial killer—and she knew David wasn't capable of that kind of violence.

She hated not knowing, especially when she didn't have even the slightest idea which direction to go.

Another rat caught Turk's attention. This one managed to safely cross the yard. Faith wondered if the rat realized how lucky it was. A few minutes earlier, and it would have ended up dinner. Sometimes there wasn't a reason. Sometimes, animals were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Or the right place if you were a predator.

CHAPTER SEVEN

He looked down at the portly man in the wheelbarrow and wondered how someone could let himself go that far. He understood a little bit of softening due to age, maybe even some love handles due to a fondness for greasy foods, but to allow oneself to grow into this? It was obscene. How did someone like that look at themselves in the mirror and not swallow a bullet?

Well, then again, when you were the kind of individual this man was, maybe it didn't matter to you if you were grotesque. Or maybe you just took your self-hate out on the innocent.

He didn't particularly care what this man's reasons were. He just wanted to watch him suffer for his crimes.

He leaned forward and tapped the man on the bridge of his nose, then drew back swiftly. The man woke with a start and tried to sit up. He watched in disgust as the man flopped around like a beached whale for a few seconds before finally rolling over onto his stomach and laboriously dragging both knees underneath him.

The man got to his feet and swayed drunkenly, looking around him with a bewildered expression. His eyes passed right over his soon-to-be killer without stopping.

Maybe he had overcompensated for the man's size and overdosed him a little. Oh well, he was awake now.

He lifted his hand and said, "Hello there."

The man jumped. He wouldn't have thought it possible that a man that size could jump, but there was no doubt that both feet left the ground when he called to him.

"Who's there?" the man cried. "Who—"

Finally, he saw the killer. His eyes widened. "Hey... what is this? Where am I?"

The killer smiled. "This is justice," he said softly. "You're going to pay for what you did."

The victim—no, the criminal—took a step back. “What the hell are you talking about? You’re insane!”

“And you’re a murderer,” the killer replied, unfazed by his target’s accusation. “And now you’ll suffer the consequences.”

The portly man stepped back again. Then, he seemed to remember that he was much bigger than the man threatening him. His eyes narrowed into what the killer was sure he thought was a menacing expression. He took a step forward and said, “You better get the hell out of here before I beat your ass!”

The killer nearly laughed. The idea of that tub of lard beating anything other than a large pizza was absurd. Well, he would make a nice meal for the dogs.

He whistled, and the animals came to him. He saw the criminal’s eyes widen, saw his skin blanch in the soft light of the streetlamps. The fat man began backing away, and the killer imagined what he must be seeing right now. A row of eyes gleaming yellow in the dark and emerging from the shadows with bared fangs and snarling throats.

This truly was justice.

“Hey,” the fat man said, “What did I do? Why are you doing this? Hey, I never killed anybody!”

“Yes, you did,” the killer insisted, “and the fact that you don’t know it only shows how horrible and evil you are. The world will be better off without you.”

“Look,” the fat man said. “I have money. I can pay you, okay? Just let me go, and I can give you a hundred thousand dollars.”

He would never understand why they all offered him money. Were they so obsessed with wealth that they assumed everyone would sacrifice their morals for cash?

Evil never came alone. A rotten apple was rotten to the core.

“This is the part where you run,” he said.

The fat man whined, a pathetic keening sound like the lowing of a cow giving birth. Then again, perhaps that was an

appropriate comparison.

The killer whistled.

The dogs rushed.

The criminal shrieked, a sound more reminiscent of a dying wildcat than a pregnant cow, and spun on his heel, another demonstration of truly shocking agility.

Alas, his luck ran out rather swiftly. He could jump, and he could twirl, but he couldn't run. He managed a half-dozen waddling shuffles before he tripped and fell heavily. He landed on his massive belly and rolled over just in time for the first of the dogs—a lean and powerful Doberman—tore into him.

The killer watched as the dogs: the Doberman, a Rottweiler, an Alsatian—he had never liked the name German Shepherd—a Bull Terrier, a Whippet and a King Charles Spaniel, all ripped the fat man to pieces. This one lasted longer than the others. The dogs focused on the fatty midsection, and it was a few minutes before it occurred to the Rottweiler that their prey might make less noise if its throat was torn out.

After the dogs had eaten their fill, the killer called them back.

“Good dogs,” he said with a grin. “Good dogs, all of you. I’m so proud of you.”

He took a moment to thank and praise each dog before leading them back to his waiting truck. In the distance, he could hear the growling coughs of the coyotes. They would descend upon the remains before too long. It was very possible that there would be nothing left for the sheriffs to find by the time the city park opened in the morning.

That was too bad. He would have preferred to leave a message for those who might feel an urge to commit the same crimes. Perhaps with his next one, he would arrange to preserve the remains long enough for the world to get a good look at them.

He started his truck and drove away, his dogs resting obediently in the bed. He looked out the window at the moon, full and bright in the sky. He smiled. He had never seen anything so peaceful.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Faith's radio buzzed, startling her back to wakefulness. She cursed inwardly for being caught napping. She couldn't recall that ever happening before. Since joining the Marine Corps out of high school, she had never slept on the job.

She answered her phone. "Bold."

"Got something," Tom's voice replied, tense with excitement. "Coyote, heading your way."

"How many?" Faith asked, getting to her feet.

"Just one," he said, "but he's got blood on his muzzle."

Faith's excitement faded. "Sheriff, that blood could be from anything, and if there's only one, he wouldn't be attacking humans."

"He could have split from his pack after the kill," Tom protested.

Faith doubted it, but she agreed to stop the animal. Maybe they could find some clue as to why they were growing bolder.

"Turk," she called. "Come."

"Can I come too?" Michael asked drily.

Faith ignored him, but he followed anyway. The three of them hit the ground and started jogging in the direction the deputy indicated.

"We're doing this for one coyote?" Michael asked.

"We're grabbing at every straw we can find," Faith retorted.

"You're telling me," he replied.

They ran for a half mile or so, Turk jogging lightly as he sniffed the air for a sign of their quarry. They ran until they nearly reached the front of the industrial park. Then Turk barked and sprinted.

"Don't hurt it!" Faith called after Turk. "Just hold it!"

They saw it a few moments later, thin, sinuous and long-legged. It immediately sprinted away when it saw Turk but released no cry. Faith felt a touch of disquiet at that.

The coyote easily outpaced the human agents, but Turk caught it quickly, leaping in front of it and backing it into a fence surrounding one of the active lots.

The coyote bared its teeth and growled, flattening its ears as Turk barked and bared his own teeth. Michael and Faith approached carefully, closing to within ten yards or so.

Faith watched the coyote and determined very quickly that it wasn't interested in fighting Turk. In fact, it seemed terrified of him in spite of its bared teeth and continual snarl. Its tail was tucked in between its legs and it leaned back against the fence, cowering instinctively as Turk held it there.

On top of that, the animal was skinny. Its ribs protruded clearly, and its limbs were spindly and rail-thin. It might have weighed twenty-five pounds at the most. Faith drew closer and she could see the blood on the animal's muzzle came from its own suppurating gums and not the remains of any prey.

She looked at Michael and saw the same irritation she felt. She felt a touch of embarrassment as well. They were trained FBI agents who had just apprehended a starving coyote.

She sighed and called Tom on the radio. "Hey, we're on our way," the Deputy said. "Did you get it?"

"Yeah," Faith replied tersely, "and now we're going to let it go."

There was a brief pause. Then Tom said. "Yeah. All right. Thanks for trying, Agent."

Faith could hear the defeat and frustration in his voice. She sighed and said, "It's only been a few days, Deputy. We'll figure this out. We just—"

"Hold on," Tom interrupted, his voice tense again.

He clicked off the radio and Faith and Michael shared a glance. Turk, finally noticing that neither of his humans were attempting to secure the suspect, looked questioningly at Faith. The coyote leaped—literally—at his chance and bolted.

Turk whipped around to pursue, but Faith called him back. “Not our guy, Turk.”

Turk trotted back to Faith and sat with a huff.

“Yeah, I know, boy,” Faith replied. “Me too.”

“Christ what a shitshow,” Michael opined.

Faith’s radio buzzed again. “Go ahead, Tom.”

“Dispatch just got a call,” Tom said, his voice tight with anger. “Residents near Jefferson Park heard snarls, howls and screams coming from the park. Said it sounded like someone was being attacked by a wild animal.”

Faith’s heart sank. “We’re on our way.”

She clicked off the radio and swore.

“What is it?” Michael asked, his eyes telling Faith he already knew the answer.

“Reports of a wild animal attack coming from Jefferson Park,” she said. “It’s in the center of town.”

“Ah,” Michael said, “you mean exactly where we weren’t. Where no one was.”

“Yep,” Faith said.

“Dammit.”

“I agree.”

They drove in silence toward Jefferson Park. Even Turk was quiet, his head resting on his front paws, eyes staring moodily ahead at the center console.

A damned coyote. A murderer was out there siccing dogs on his victims and two highly-trained decorated FBI agents, along with the entire Goldwood sheriff’s department, were looking for coyotes.

Tom was in a similarly pissed-off mood when they met him at Jefferson Park. He nodded curtly to the agents, a sour frown on his face, and led them to the crime scene.

They saw the victim a few minutes later. He had been killed in a small clearing in the artificial forest that covered the park.

“Meet George Merrill,” Tom said, gesturing to the body in front of them.

Faith was accustomed to the sight and smell of death, but her nostrils still flared at this one. George had been a substantial man in life, and there was quite a bit more of him left behind than the previous two victims. What was left behind was not left pretty.

Behind her, Michael gagged. He managed to hold down his vomit but didn't turn back around. “Christhell,” he muttered.

“Wrong place, right attitude,” Tom agreed, his normally soft drawl clipped and terse in his frustration. “Goddammit,” he cursed. “The one place we weren't looking.”

“Has the coroner been notified?” Faith asked.

“Yeah, he's on his way. *Goddammit!*”

Tom took his hat off and threw it on the ground. Faith could see an almost perfect bald spot in the shape of the hat. He took several deep breaths, hands clenching and unclenching. Then he took a final breath and released it slowly, relaxing his hands and shoulders as he did.

He picked up his hat, dusted it off calmly, and set it carefully back on his head. “Well,” he said, his tone now calm as well, though still clearly moody, “Let's get to work.”

His outburst over, Tom proved to be very efficient, quickly directing his officers to cordon off the scene and begin cataloguing evidence. Turk sniffed the scene, barking whenever he found a sign of the attackers. Faith and Michael floated among the different CSI teams on the scene but allowed the professionals to do their work uninterrupted, asking questions only when the CSIs indicated they were ready to answer.

The victim had died of asphyxiation when his throat was ripped out. The dog that had bit his throat off had somehow managed to miss both carotid arteries and both jugular veins, meaning the man could have lasted as long as seven minutes before finally passing, although the CSI believed it was likely over much sooner than that.

It was dogs, obviously. Turk found footprints belonging to several different breeds, in line with the previous victims. One set of footprints looked disturbingly like Turk's: a German Shepherd.

Turk looked at Faith and whined softly. She wondered if he could recognize the similarity between his footprints and those of the killer. She knelt down and hugged him. "You're a good boy, Turk. That's not you."

She had no idea if Turk understood what she was saying, but he seemed comforted by her words.

They worked through the night, but it wasn't until after midnight that the most critical piece of evidence was found. Once more, it was Turk's nose that led them to the find. He barked enthusiastically until Faith, Michael, Tom, and a few unoccupied CSIs rushed over.

"Well, there it is," Tom said when he arrived. "Now we know for sure."

In the mud, clearly impressed next to prints from a large dog and a much smaller one, was a clear set of bootprints. Men's size twelve, Faith guessed.

"If these are the killer's prints, then why didn't we see them at the other crime scenes?" Michael asked. "If coyotes and dogs could leave footprints, then a full-grown man should have left prints too."

"He's probably covering his prints up," Faith replied, "but leaving the dog's footprints because they support the narrative he's trying to create that these deaths were accidents."

"So he just slipped here?" Tom asked. "Forgot some prints?"

"Probably," Faith said. "It's also possible that since this is a more heavily trafficked location, he was more anxious and rushed to leave without taking care to cover his tracks."

"Either way," Michael said, "we know for sure that these killings aren't an act of God."

"Depends on the God you worship, I guess," Tom said.

“I hate to be morbid,” Dr. Jansen said, “but Mr. Merrill might be our most important victim to date.”

“How’s that?” Faith asked.

“Well, he’s proof,” the coroner said, “that I’m right and that it’s dogs of various sizes and breeds that are killing these people, not coyotes.”

He lifted a small cone-shaped incisor and held it up for the two agents to see. “See this? Too slender and fragile to be a coyote’s tooth. I believe one of the narrow-jawed terrier species, perhaps a whippet.”

“How do you know so much about dogs?” Faith asked.

“My father used to judge dog shows,” he said, “A peculiar passion, but one he found very rewarding. I assisted him at many of the shows when I was in high school. I never developed a taste for the profession myself, but it was nice to spend time with him. He could be a terribly aloof man.”

“So how many dogs?” Michael interrupted, turning the subject back to the matter at hand.

“Ah, yes,” Dr. Jensen replied. “Six. The terrier, a medium-sized breed with a strong bite, perhaps a bulldog or a bull terrier, three large dogs, a Shepherd, a Rottweiler, and a Doberman, and a sixth dog I don’t recognize but that is certainly not a coyote.

“You’re that certain on the breed?”

“I am,” he assured her, “but I’ll still have canine experts verify my findings.”

“Would dogs of these breeds normally cooperate on a hunt like this?” Michael asked.

“Oh God, no,” Dr. Jensen said, “Dogs rarely hunt in packs, even feral dogs. When they do, it’s fraught with competition and violence. The smaller dogs would be chased off or eaten. And they would absolutely not share a kill. That’s just not how dogs work, domesticated dogs, anyway. They’re not wolves.

They don't cooperate well. No, this is certainly the result of training."

"Yeah," Faith said, "we found bootprints."

"I'm not surprised," Dr. Jensen replied. "I said from the beginning that this was a human killer and not accidental attacks."

"I don't suppose you're as good with shoeprints as you are with bite marks?" Michael asked drily.

"I'm afraid not," Dr. Jensen replied. "I was never quite as good with people as I was with animals."

They left the coroner's office and headed upstairs to Tom's desk. Tom was sitting on the edge of his desk, arms folded across his chest, and talking to a few deputies. He waved them off when he saw the agents approach. "What are we looking at?" he asked.

"Six different dogs, six different breeds," Faith replied. "Working together to kill and... well, anyway, it's not normal for dogs of these varying breeds to work well together. There's definitely a human behind this."

Tom nodded. "So nothing we didn't already know?"

"I'll write down the breeds he listed," Faith replied. "That can narrow down animal control's search. We should also prioritize people with a history of interacting with dogs professionally. Our killer is an excellent trainer to be able to control the animals like this."

Tom shrugged. "I'll take it."

"Anything on the family angle?" Michael asked.

"Nothing that jumps off the page," Tom replied. "We're going to have to wait to interview them until George is officially identified and the family notified."

"Right," Faith said. "Well, at least we know not to go looking for coyotes anymore."

"Thank God for small blessings," Michael added.

Faith wasn't sure she'd characterize it as a blessing. If wild animals weren't responsible, then there was someone out there

killing people with a pack of vicious dogs.

Then again, take the trappings of civilization away from a person, and what you're left with is nothing more than another animal.

CHAPTER NINE

He woke with the first light of dawn but remained in bed, smiling slightly as he waited. A few minutes later, he heard the pitter patter of paws big and small. A moment after that, a massive snout pushed into his face. He laughed and wrapped his arms around Prince Edward, his stately and not-quite-elderly Great Dane. Prince Edward was not quite elderly, but he was old enough that he was permitted to stay home when the others went hunting.

As Prince Edward solemnly licked his face, he grinned at the collection of faces gathered around his bed. He enjoyed Prince Edward's attentions for a few moments longer, then rolled out of bed. The dogs immediately began rushing for the kitchen.

"Ah ah ah," he said, grinning and wagging his finger. "Puppies with dirty muzzles and paws don't get to eat."

The dogs shifted direction, rushing toward the back door. After a slight scuffle at the door, they lined up and took turns running outside and swimming across a narrow moving pool. He had paid nearly a hundred thousand dollars to have the pool and the running water installed, but it was worth it. He had nearly twenty dogs to care for, and it wasn't practical for one man to bathe twenty dogs.

The puppies shook themselves when they got out of the pool, then trotted back to the house. He waited with a thick terrycloth towel and dried each pup quickly and thoroughly before sending them to eat. Each dog trotted calmly to its own food bowl. Each bowl contained precisely portioned helpings of food that differed from breed to breed. It consistently amazed him how many people accepted the assertion that all dogs could eat the same diet.

Well, these dogs would never have to worry about that again. Their owners were all blissfully unaware of their existence. Most were blissfully unaware of anyone's existence.

He wondered if it was a mistake to have started killing his victims in town. He had moved his activities closer to home so that people would notice and think twice about earning his wrath. It was too soon to tell if his actions would make a difference, but he had to try. It wasn't enough just to kill them. There were too many. He could kill all his life and never make a dent in the number of assholes that filled the world.

But if he could get people to realize, to understand and start talking about this issue, then maybe he could make a difference. Maybe even within his own lifetime.

Well, that was beside the point. One had to do the right thing even when one didn't notice an improvement in the world because of it.

He reached for the last dog, but his hands landed on air. He frowned and looked around for the last puppy, a beautiful King Charles Spaniel that had until recently belonged to one Gigi Demetrious.

“Trotter?” he called. “Trotter, where are you?”

There was no response. The other dogs ignored the call, enjoying their meals and taking care not to make a mess on their alpha's floor.

He stood, disquiet seeping into his veins. He walked toward the dog's bedrooms, calling for Trotter again.

There was no response, and the room was empty. His heart started to pound, and his tongue felt thick in his mouth.

“Trotter?” he called.

The last syllable came out in a hoarse squeak. Prince Edward looked up from his bowl, scowling in concern at his alpha. The man offered a weakly reassuring smile that didn't come close to calming the big dog. It left its meal and trotted to his alpha's side.

“Have you seen Trotter, Prince Edward?” the man asked, his voice thready and weak, “I can't seem to...”

His voice trailed off when he saw it. Through the back door, there was a small hole underneath the backyard fence. It

was small, just large enough for a King Charles Spaniel to slip through.

The world spun around him. He stumbled and just managed to catch himself on the wall before he fell.

Prince Edward barked in alarm and positioned himself in between the wall and Alpha, steadying Alpha so he didn't fall to the floor. The other dogs heard the bark and abandoned their meals, rushing to Alpha's side.

"Oh God," he whispered numbly. "Oh God. Oh God, Trotter."

He had just rescued Trotter. For God's sake, he'd had the dog for four days. How could he have lost him? He'd never lost a dog. How did he even manage to dig through the fence?

He rushed outside and found that the chicken wire that was supposed to extend three feet into the ground had been pulled up.

"Dammit, the raccoon!" he shouted, loudly enough that it prompted another panicked response from his dogs.

Last week, a raccoon had gotten into the backyard. Greco and Brutus—the two English Mastiffs that slept outside and acted as guards for the property—had torn it literally limb from limb.

He assumed the raccoon simply scaled the fence, but apparently, it had dug underneath the fence and used its damned dexterous little fingers to lift the chicken wire out of the hole. Well, it had paid for its idiocy with its life, but now Trotter, poor sweet Trotter, was out alone in the world without his pack to protect him.

Prince Edward nudged him. Brutus whined. Greco growled and looked wildly around for the threat. The other dogs watched him silently, waiting for him to reassure them that everything was okay.

He took a deep breath and forced a smile. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll find Trotter. You boys just stay here and be safe. I'll be back in no time."

He grabbed his keys and stuck his feet into his flip-flops rather than take the time to put socks on and lace up his boots. He headed to his truck and exercised every ounce of his will to drive calmly and within the speed limit as he looked for his missing dog.

CHAPTER TEN

“We’re looking for people who would know how to train dogs to be vicious,” Michael said, “Animal trainers, gangsters, junkyard owners, former K9 handlers.”

Turk was as excited as the two human agents were and paced the floor of the station while the two human agents huddled over Tom’s desk.

Tom snapped his head up at Michael. “No offense,” Michael said, lifting his hands placatingly, “but it’s somewhere to look.”

Tom sighed and nodded. “The only two K9 handlers who aren’t active duty live out in Florida now. I can provide alibis for everyone who isn’t retired, so that’s a nonstarter. No offense taken, though.”

“What about the other angles?” Faith asked. “We could be onto something here.”

“I’ll look,” Tom said, “but I have to look manually. We don’t have the database software that the big departments have.”

Faith nodded and tried to calm her impatience. Impatience like that had allowed the last killer she investigated to nearly get away with burying a nurse alive. This killer was escalating quickly, but that was precisely in Faith’s wheelhouse. She needed to be calm and trust the process. No wild goose chases.

A gnawing voice in the back of her head reminded her that she had trusted the process with the Copycat Killer and now Gordon was dead.

She pushed that voice away. This killer, whoever he was, was not the copycat killer. And in any case, the two situations were vastly different.

Why was she thinking about him right now? She had gotten Michael, David and Ellie to safety. There was nothing else she could do until the Boss stopped monitoring her so closely. She

had already been through this thought process, so why couldn't she set it aside for later?

Because Gordon was dead. It was that simple. A man she had come to consider friend, a man who alone among her peers and superiors had faith in her at a time when she needed to be trusted more than anything, was now dead, and it was the fault of this asshole who considered himself the reincarnation of Jethro Trammell.

"Got something," Tom said.

Faith's heart leaped for a moment. Her ruminations had made her forget where she was. For an instant, she thought that he had information on the Copycat Killer.

She reddened slightly, hoping he didn't notice. "What is it?" she asked.

"Who is it," Tom corrected. "Jedson Franks. Junkyard owner, 5437 Bolton Street."

"That's in the industrial park," Michael said.

"Yep. Near where Gigi Demetrious was found. Let's see, he has... wow. Eleven dogs in total, some Rottweilers, some Pit Bulls, some German Shepherds."

"That sounds like our guy," Michael said.

"Well, it sounds like someone with the skills and experience to be our guy," Faith clarified. "Let's not assume guilt until we investigate a little."

"I'm so glad you took me literally," Michael said drily, "because I was being one hundred percent literal when I said that."

Faith ignored him and told Tom. "You want in on this one?"

Tom shook his head. "Nah, probably better for you to do it. If he sees a deputy sheriff, he might get spooked."

"Fair enough," Faith said. "Let's go get him."

She called Turk, and the three agents left for 5437 Bolton Street.

"You're going to bring Turk in with us?" Michael asked.

"Yeah," Faith replied, "Why not?"

“You’re not afraid he’ll get hurt?”

“I doubt it,” Faith said, “He’s tough as nails, and he’s had training. He was in the Marine Corps once, a few years after me.”

Michael pursed his lips and looked away. Faith smiled. “He’ll be okay, I promise. So will I, too, if that matters at all to you.”

Michael lifted a hand and wagged it back and forth. “Meh.”

Faith rolled her eyes, but she was grinning as she headed to the car. She knew that it was just as likely this first suspect wasn’t their guy as it was that he turned out to be the very murderer she was looking for, but it was exciting to finally be chasing a real lead.

They reached the junkyard just before midmorning. The business showed no sign of activity despite the sign that hung in the window that clearly read open.

They entered the office, but it was empty. Jedson Franks had disappeared somewhere.

Faith and Michael pushed to the back of the house. When they reached the back door, they found it ajar.

Michael and Faith drew their sidearms and cautiously navigated the yard. This would be a perfect place for a dog ambush. He probably picked the other warehouse because that one had a similar layout to his.

Turk’s ears flattened the moment he saw the open door, and as they rounded a corner, he barked suddenly, stiffening and growling and staring—teeth-bared—at the twisted hulks of old cars.

“What is it, Turk?” Faith asked tensely. “What do you see?”

A moment later, she saw it when a dozen burly dogs leaped after them from behind different scrap piles. Faith didn’t waste any time. She turned and ran, Michael behind her and Turk in between them and the other dogs.

The dogs flanked them on either side, running easily, keeping pace but not outstripping them. She caught glimpses

of their spiked collars and ivory-white fangs. They were big dogs, but she couldn't tell the breed since they kept running behind piles of scrap and the mangled remains of cars and other vehicles.

One of the dogs ventured close to Faith's left side. Turk sprinted forward and snapped at the dog's leg. It leapt out of the way just before Turk could maul it.

Another dog tried the same on the other side, and once more, Turk leapt to their defense. The dogs continued to probe, not converging for an attack but keeping the fleeing agents headed in one direction.

Faith saw the gate they had entered and turned toward it. Immediately, three of the dogs ran in front of the gate, standing their ground with teeth bared. Faith pivoted, and her left leg slid out from underneath her. She nearly fell, and for a terrifying moment, one of the dogs rushed her.

Turk moved in a blur of fang and fur. He hit the guard dog from the side, and the burly Doberman landed sprawling on its side. Turk leaped at it again, but the two other dogs came to the aid of their companion and forced Turk to back down.

Michael helped Faith to her feet and the three of them resumed running—away from the gate, which was now protected by a half-dozen dogs. They were in the open now, and in addition to a few more Dobermans, Faith could see Pit Bulls and Rottweilers. Those breeds weren't violent by nature, but they were ferociously protective. She knew they wouldn't hesitate to kill if they felt threatened.

Or if their master commanded them to.

Michael clearly felt the same way. Faith heard the soft scrape of a slide being pulled back and turned to see him chambering a round in his service weapon.

"No!" she called to him, shouting to be heard over the dogs. "Not unless there's no other choice!"

"I don't see many other choices, do you?" he shouted back.

Still, he took his finger off of the trigger.

They reached the other fence, and the dogs immediately surrounded them in a half-circle, rushing in whenever any of the three tried to break to the side. Turk stood bravely in front of them, holding his ground as the dogs approached and not letting himself get torn up.

That wouldn't last long, though. There were a dozen of them and one of Turk, and many of the dogs were massive Rottweilers half again as big as Turk. Michael lifted his weapon and looked to Faith, who shook her head.

David had told her something once about how to handle aggressive dogs. She needed to be firm and commanding without being aggressive. Basically, to act and speak like an alpha.

One of the Rottweilers probed at them, and Turk snapped at it. The big dog sauntered back to the pack, unconcerned but unwilling to test the German Shepherd yet.

Faith stood tall and squared her shoulders. She frowned down at the dogs and said firmly, "Heel!"

The dogs paused a moment, looking at her with confusion.

"Stand down!" she said.

The dogs glanced behind them, then back at Faith, as if to ask, "Are you talking to *us*?"

"Stand down," she repeated.

One of the pit bulls rushed at Faith. Turk leaped in between them, teeth bared, ears flat, but the pit bull didn't stop.

"Stop!" she called to the dog.

Amazingly, the dog stopped. It looked up at Faith, cocking its head to the side in obvious bewilderment. Turk lunged at the pit, and it jumped backward, snarling, but once it landed it stopped snarling and once more looked behind its friends and then back at Faith.

Faith tried taking a few steps forward, but immediately, several of the dogs converged on her and Turk and didn't back off when she commanded them.

She tried a different tactic. She looked behind the dogs, in the direction they had glanced earlier. She didn't see anything,

but her ruse worked. Instantly, all of the dogs stopped and turned to look expectantly in the same direction.

Faith sprinted toward a small gap in between a few of the dogs, Turk following. If she could get free and get the pack to chase her and Turk, there was a chance Michael could call for help.

They nearly made it, but one of the Dobermans turned around and caught them just before they reached the gap. It whirled around and snapped at Faith. Turk leaped forward and closed his jaws around the taller dog's front paw. The Doberman yelped and snapped at Turk's neck. Turk was able to sidestep the bite but had to release the Doberman.

Three Rottweilers charged when the Doberman was bit and both Faith and Turk had to jump backwards to avoid getting bit. She noticed that the dogs didn't pursue them back to the fence but allowed a few yards gap between them. They weren't trying to kill them, just hold them there.

They looked behind themselves again, although this time, a few Dobermans kept their gazes locked on the agents in case they tried to escape again. Instead of turning back around, they started barking enthusiastically. Faith followed their gaze and saw a heavily bearded man in a faded leather jacket and a cowboy hat running their direction.

When he drew close, he pulled a revolver from his pocket and aimed it at the agents. Michael snapped his handgun up to cover the suspect, and Faith drew her own weapon but quickly called to the man to try to de-escalate the situation.

"FBI!" she called out. "Stand down!"

The dogs must have been familiar with guns because they reacted poorly to the sight of two weapons trained on their owner. They sprinted toward the three agents, and only a sharp command from the junkyard owner stopped them.

"FBI!" Faith called again, opening her vest to show her Federal ID. "Call your dogs off!"

"What?" the man called back. "FBI? What the hell are you doing here?" He turned to his dogs and shouted, "Quiet!"

The dogs instantly fell silent, looking between their owner and the agents in confusion. Did their master not want them to attack the trespassers who were threatening him with guns?

“We’re here on official business,” Faith said. “Can we talk to you for a few minutes?”

“About what?” the man asked suspiciously, his gun still trained on them.

“We’re investigating a series of local murders involving dogs over the past week,” Michael answered. “We just came here to talk.”

“So you broke into my junkyard and started walking around looking instead of calling me and asking to talk?”

“Are you Jedson Franks?” Faith asked.

“Don’t worry about who I am,” the man replied, “Tell me why the hell you trespassed in my yard?”

Faith and Michael shared a look. Technically speaking, without a warrant, they shouldn’t have trespassed. Admitting to that mistake could be dangerous, though. If this really was their killer, then they could be giving him ammunition to avoid prosecution or, at the very least, to make their job very difficult.

But Faith wasn’t convinced anymore that these were the dogs who had committed the murders. They were clearly very well-trained. Even the Doberman Turk bit immediately resumed holding the trespassers and made no attempt to return Turk’s bite.

That didn’t mean, of course, that they would hesitate to kill the agents if ordered to, but the victims weren’t just killed by the dogs that murdered them, they were eaten alive. These dogs didn’t strike Faith as the type to go completely wild.

And the junkyard owner didn’t show the fear or guilt that a murder suspect would show. He didn’t even appear that angry despite the revolver in his hand. He, like his dogs, seemed more confused than anything else.

She would risk the truth.

“We apologize for that, sir,” she said. “We have reason to believe that a pack of dogs is being used to commit murder. Your junkyard is near the location of one of the murders, and you are one of the few businesses to rely on a large pack of guard dogs for security. We did enter your property without calling because we feared if you were the killer, you would hide evidence if given the chance.”

“Well, I ain’t the killer,” he said, “and you shouldn’t hop a fence with a sign that says VICIOUS DOGS INSIDE on it in clear English. If I hadn’t been here, they could have hurt you.”

“You’re right,” Faith said, “It was a mistake. It won’t happen again. Still, we do need to ask you some questions, sir, if you wouldn’t mind.”

He considered a moment, then shrugged and said, “Well, if you promise to call your dog off, I’ll call mine off.”

He nodded respectfully at Turk, who cocked his head in an expression of confusion that was adorably like the one the guard dogs wore. She imagined this would go down as one of the strangest interactions any of these dogs had ever experienced.

“Very well, sir,” she said. “But you need to holster your weapon before my partner and I can lower ours.”

The man hesitated briefly, eyes flicking back and forth between the two of them. Finally, though, he nodded and lowered his handgun.

Faith waited until he uncocked the hammer and put the revolver back in his pocket before lowering her own weapon. Michael followed suit, but kept a wary eye on the dogs and the junkyard owner throughout.

“Stand down, Turk,” Faith said, “We’ll be okay.”

Turk looked at her, nonplussed, but complied.

“Okay, boys and gals,” the junkyard owner said. “You can relax now. These three are friends.”

The dogs once more demonstrated their exceptional training. The moment they heard the word friends, they rushed the three agents again, but this time, they were exuberantly

friendly, leaping up and kissing the human agents' faces. In between head pats and shoulder rubs, Faith caught the Doberman that had mixed it up with Turk earlier trotting to the Shepherd and nuzzling him. Turk licked at the dog's injured paw and then chuffed an apology.

The junkyard owner chuckled. "Ain't dogs just the best?"

Faith and Michael looked at each other, then turned back to the owner. "Just wonderful," Michael said drily.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Yeah, they’re scary-looking for sure, but they’re sweethearts on the inside.”

The junkyard owner, who was indeed Mr. Jedson Franks, beamed at two pit bulls and a Rottweiler, all of whom were female and all of whom seemed to have fallen in love with Michael, who gradually relaxed when it became apparent that they wanted hugs and pets and not to tear his throat out of his body.

He offered a glass of water to Faith, who accepted gratefully, and sat across from her with one of his own. “I hope you don’t mind me saying it, but that was the funniest thing I’ve ever seen watching you try to do the dog trainer tricks. I just about died laughing when I saw you trying to run through the line.”

Faith managed a wry smile in spite of her embarrassment. Once convinced that the agents were who they said they were, he turned out to be just as exuberant and friendly as his dogs. “I’m glad your dogs are so well-trained. They definitely could have killed us if they wanted to.”

“Oh, they would never do that,” he said. “Unless you tried to hurt me, I guess. Most you’d get is a nip or two if you got violent with them. My cousin’s a former K9 handler. He’s the one who helped me train ‘em.”

Faith nearly told Jedson that she was a K9 handler too, but didn’t want to remind him about the “dog trainer tricks.” Then again, he’d probably figured it out since Turk obeyed her every command with the same professionalism with which his dogs obeyed him.

“They do a damned good job of pretending otherwise,” Michael said.

Jedson chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve had some problems with thieves for a little while now. They like to cut holes in the fence and steal scrap metal. I started sleeping nights here, and

I got this—” he patted his weapon “—just in case things got touchy. I had a couple dogs—” he nodded to two Rottweilers who were sitting on either side of Turk and sharing a beef bone with him “—Big Guy and Buddy, but I decided to get some more. Figured a dozen guard dogs would be enough to scare off even the most hardened criminals.

“How long ago was this?” Michael asked.

Jed scratched his thickly-maned chin. “Oh, a little over two years back, I reckon. Maybe close to three.” He nodded at his dogs. “Most of these pups are only three or four. Except for Big Guy, Buddy and Misty.” He gestured to the Doberman who had fought Turk earlier. “They’re my senior citizens. Misty’s nine, and Big Guy and Buddy are both ten.”

“Damn,” Michael said, “they’re in great shape for that age.”

Jedson beamed and puffed his chest out like a kid on Christmas. “Well, thank you kindly, Agent. I sure do love my dogs.” He looked at Turk and nodded. “He looks about eight or nine, right?”

“Just turned eight,” Faith said.

“He looks good too,” Jedson said. “Tough dogs, Shepherds. Like Dobermans. Fiercely loyal.”

Faith thought of the many times Turk had protected her over the years and smiled. “Yes. They sure are.”

“Sorry about the scar,” Jedson added, pointing at the long scar on Turk’s left side. “Line of duty?”

Faith’s smile faded slightly. She and Turk had been introduced shortly after their injuries at the hands of Jethro Trammell, the original Donkey Killer. They had rehabilitated together. In many ways, Faith owed her recovery to Turk. “Yes,” she answered, “a long time ago.”

“That’s rough.” Jedson shook his head. “Never could understand people who were cruel to their dogs. All they want is for you to love them.”

“So it seems,” Michael said.

Faith’s smile returned when she saw a massive Rottweiler head pressed against Michael’s own while one of the Pit Bulls

wriggled under his arm and laid its own head on his chest. It lifted its eyes to Michael's and looked at him worshipfully.

"You should get a dog," she commented.

"Well, Ellie's not... anyway, we should get to the interview and get out of Mr. Franks' hair."

"Oh please, call me Jed," Jedson replied. "Mr. Franks sounds like the guy who sells hot dogs at the ballgame." He threw his head back and laughed briefly, then said, "Well, I hope Ellie, whoever she is, comes around. Ain't nothing on Earth like a good dog."

Faith glanced at Turk, and her smile faded once more. Ellie was afraid of dogs because the last time she had seen a dog, Turk had picked up on Faith's mistrust of Ellie and lunged at her. It had driven a wedge between her and Michael that nearly ruined their friendship.

"Jed," Faith said, moving forward with the interview. "Can you confirm your whereabouts this past Sunday, Wednesday and Friday nights?"

"Friday meaning yesterday?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I was here Sunday and Wednesday. Security cameras here don't work, but maybe the warehouse across the street saw me pull in and not pull out until the morning. Friday night, I go out drinking with the boys at the motorcycle club. Good thing it wasn't tonight, or they would have held you on the fence until I showed up after midnight."

"Can anyone verify your presence at the bar last night?"

Jed grinned. "Well, from what I understand, there's pictures online of me taking my shirt off and singing Alan Jackson for karaoke. I don't know if y'all want to see that, but it'll prove I didn't kill anyone."

His smile vanished suddenly. "Hey, you said someone's using dogs to do this?"

"Yes," Faith replied.

He sighed and shook his head. "That's too bad. I could see Coyotes and Wolves killing people and being all right. Maybe

not coyotes unless they're desperate, but dogs? They were bred to be man's best friend. You gotta really mess with their heads to turn them into murderers."

Faith noted that Jed seemed much more concerned with the impact this was having on the dogs than the impact it was having on the humans, but he was friendly and once convinced the agents weren't threats, he immediately dropped his aggression. If his alibi was checked out, they could rule him out as a suspect. Anyway, the dogs didn't seem like the type to see red, or the three of them would likely not be alive to talk about it.

"We'll have to follow up on your alibis," Faith said, "but is there anyone else you can think of who might have committed these murders?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't. It doesn't make sense to me. You could try the other junkyards, I guess. A few of them have guard dogs too, but I talk to them from time to time, and none of them seem the type to hurt other people 'less they have to. And I mean, I really have to. We junkyard guys get a bad rap sometimes, but we're good people. We might be a little awkward sometimes, but we're not angry. We just have to deal with thieves, and that's why we rely on our good boys and girls."

He held out his arms, and several dogs rushed him. He embraced them all and grinned while they licked him.

Turk left the bone and trotted to Faith and Michael, looking expectantly at them. Faith took the hint and stood. "Keep your phone on, Jed," she said, extending her hand. "I'll make sure to call ahead next time we have to visit."

"Anytime," Jed said, taking her hand. "Sorry again about everything. Just have to be careful. There's a lot of crazies out there."

"So Franks was a dead end too, huh?" Tom said after the agents related their story. He sighed and shook his head. "Well,

that puts us back to square one.”

“What about the rest of the list?” Michael said. “We still have to interview them.”

“We did,” Tom replied. “I sent officers to each of the owners’ houses and businesses. They were all reluctant to talk at first, but once they did, they were all able to provide alibis, same as Franks.”

“What about the dogs?” Faith asked.

“None of them fit the profile,” Tom answered. “They were all big dogs: Dobermans, Bulldogs, Rottweilers, Shepherds... none of them smaller than fifty pounds.”

That was a problem because at least two of the dogs for each victim had been smaller than twenty pounds. “No sign of smaller dogs elsewhere on the property?” Faith asked.

“We’d need to get warrants if we wanted to search,” Tom replied, “but three of the five volunteered to let the officers look around, and they didn’t see anything. Should we look into the other two?”

Faith considered a moment. “No, not if they have alibis. If they had smaller dogs, they would have no reason not to tell the officers unless they were the killers. Since they have alibis, I think we can safely rule this out. Besides, I have a feeling that our killer probably hasn’t registered his dogs, so the list is probably not as helpful as we hoped it would be.”

“What about Franks’ dogs?” Tom asked. “Those were all different sizes, right?”

“Yes, but none below fifty pounds.”

Tom sighed. “So square one then. Dammit.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Faith broke the silence by saying, “Well, if we’re back to square one, then that’s where we need to start. Let’s break for lunch, and when we get back, we’ll go back to the victims. There has to be a connection between them, even if the victims themselves didn’t know it. There’s a reason the killer chose them, no matter how random it seems.”

“Agreed,” Michael said. “We’ve been focusing on the murder weapon, but that hasn’t gotten us anywhere.”

Tom nodded. “All right. I’ll see you back here in an hour.”

Faith and Michael headed to a local Mexican restaurant that promised Los Angeles-style street tacos. Faith wasn’t sure what a Los Angeles-style street taco was, but the spice and citrus of the liberally seasoned tacos cleared her mind and sharpened her senses.

“Well, it’s not L.A.,” Michael said, “but it’s damned good.”

“What’s special about L.A. street tacos?” Faith asked.

“Cilantro,” he said. “That’s the one thing these tacos are missing. “Cilantro ties everything together.”

Faith pointed to the door to the kitchen. “You want to go tell them?”

“You want to go screw yourself?” he bantered back.

“Screw?” Faith replied with a chuckle. “What’s wrong, Michael? Ellie doesn’t let you use curse words?”

“She lets me use them in bed,” he quipped.

This banter was helpful not only to relieve tension but to keep their wits sharp. It was an underrated benefit of a partner who could keep up with Faith’s biting wit.

“Really?” she said, furrowing her brow innocently. “Here, let me call her and ask.”

She pulled out her phone and started to dial. Michael met her eyes and pulled his own phone out. “While you’re doing that, let me ask David what your favorite words are.”

“All right,” Faith said, setting her phone down. “Truce.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Faith’s phone rang, and when they both saw David’s number, they shared a glance. “You think he heard me?” Michael asked.

“If he did, you better apologize,” Faith warned as she answered the phone. “He has a lot of dog friends he can sic on you.”

“Didn’t you see me at the junkyard?” he replied. “Dogs love me.”

Faith rolled her eyes. “Hey, David,” she said into the phone. “How’s your vacation?”

“Soon to be over,” he replied. “My parents had plans this week, so I’m on my way home.”

“What?” Faith said, her smile disappearing. “Why? What about your sister?”

Michael frowned and mouthed, “What’s wrong?”

Faith shook her head and stood. She headed outside. Turk started to follow her, but she pointed at him and shook her finger and the dog sat back down next to Michael.

“My sister has her kids, and they weren’t expecting me for two months. I’m not going to drop in uninvited just because... I’m here.”

Faith caught the momentary hesitation and what it meant. When she was outside, she said, “David, you can’t come back. It’s too soon.”

David sighed. “Faith, I appreciate your concern, but I’m not going to just hang out in Nevada doing nothing for two weeks. I have patients who need my help, and it’s not right for me to just abandon them.”

“So come out here,” she said. “I’ll get a room with you. I’ll have to work, but we’ll have time to spend together at night, and there’s a lot to do in Goldwood.”

“What’s there to do in Goldwood?”

“Well, there’s...” her voice trailed off as she realized the only things to do in Goldwood involved going places where the killer could easily attack him. He hadn’t struck during daylight yet, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t give it a try.

“Faith,” David said with frustratingly gentle patience. “I’m going home.”

“David, you can’t.” she sighed. “Look, I know you think I’m being paranoid, but you need to trust me on this. It’s not safe for you in Philadelphia.”

“Faith, I’m a big boy. I can take care of myself. If you want, I can get a dog and walk with him when I’m out at night. I wasn’t planning to get a dog because... well, I wasn’t planning on it yet, but I can if it’ll make you feel better.”

Faith felt a stab of pain. He wasn’t planning to get a dog, almost certainly because he was planning for Faith and Turk to move in with him. Faith hated to think that what was going on now might once more cool him off to the idea of a future with her.

But she couldn’t risk him putting himself in danger. The original Donkey Killer had nearly killed Turk. She didn’t know if the Copycat Killer was as physically imposing as the nearly seven-foot Trammell, but he was able to defeat Gordon hand to hand and beat him to death, and the dog David got would almost certainly not be a highly trained K9 and former Marine dog.

“David, please,” she said, “just a few more days.”

“But it isn’t going to be a few more days, Faith,” David said, his veneer of patience breaking. “It’s going to be a few more days, and then a few more days, and then a few more days, and then months or even longer. I know you’re a good detective, Faith, but I don’t see you finding this guy in two weeks when your colleagues haven’t found him in nearly two years.”

Faith’s heart twisted again, but she kept her cool. “I just need a little time,” she said. “I’m going to get this guy, David. I promise.”

“I know you will, Faith, but I can’t just put my life on hold while... wait, did you say you were in Arizona?”

“Yes. Goldwood, Arizona.”

“Why are you in Goldwood, Arizona?”

“I have a case,” she said.

“So you’re not even working on the Copycat Killer right now?”

Faith’s heart sank a little further. “I’m going to,” she said, “The Boss just needed me to work on this first.”

“Then what,” David said, no longer even attempting to hide his anger. “He’ll just give you open-ended leave to go snooping around the case? You’re not even assigned to this case anymore, are you?”

Faith ran her hands through her hair and took several deep breaths to calm herself. The worst part was that she sympathized with David’s position. She had to look completely insane right now. She had no strong evidence that the Copycat Killer was after them. Or rather, she had strong evidence, but only to herself because only she knew the significance of the killer’s note. To everyone else, she just looked paranoid again.

“David, please,” she said. “I know this seems crazy to you.”

“That’s putting it lightly, Faith. I…” he paused a moment. “Faith, I’m concerned about you. Have you been talking to Dr. West about this?”

“Yes, David, I am, but I’m not just being paranoid. You have to trust me on this. Please don’t come home. Not until I tell you it’s safe.”

David was silent for a while. Faith held her breath and prayed silently that he would do the right thing. Finally, he sighed and said, “All right. I can stay here for ten more days. I already rescheduled my appointments anyway.”

She sighed with relief. “Thank you, David. Thank you so much. I love you, okay?”

“I love you too, Faith,” he said, “but look, ten days from now, I’m coming home, no matter what, and as soon as you get back here, we’re having a serious talk. We need to lay some ground rules going forward if this is going to work.”

Faith slumped as though the wind was knocked out of her when he said that. She hated this. God, she hated this so much. When she found that damned copycat killer, she would—

You will remain perfectly professional, she told herself. You will not let him destroy you.

She took a deep breath. “All right. I understand. I really love you, David.”

“I really love you too,” David said, the frustration gone, leaving behind only mild exasperation. “You neurotic, anxious worrywart, you.”

“Hey!” Faith protested. “That’s mean!”

She grinned as she said it, though. If he was still teasing her, then he still loved her, and they would still be okay. She had no idea if that made any logical sense, but it felt good to her, so she went with it.

“Well, I’ve just been told I need to spend ten days watching old people play slots in Not-Vegas, Nevada,” he grouched, “so I’ll be mean if I want to.”

She giggled and said, “Believe me, David, I will make it up to you so well when we both get home, you’ll be begging for a chance to do it all over again.”

“I like the sound of that,” he said.

“You’ll like the feel of it even better,” she promised.

The door to the restaurant opened, and Michael and Turk walked out and started toward her. “Gotta go,” she said. “Love you, baby.”

“Love you too.”

She hung up just as the other two arrived. “Everything okay?” Michael asked.

“Yeah, fine,” she said. “Are you ready to head back?”

“Sure,” Michael said. “You sure everything’s all right?”

“Right as rain,” she said with a grin.

An indecipherable look passed over his face for a moment. Then he nodded and said, “All right. Let’s not keep the good deputy waiting then.”

Faith managed to keep her demeanor upbeat, but her heart felt like a stone.

What if David went home after all? What if the case kept her away from him too long to stop him getting killed? Would she be returning home to another body after this case was finished?

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Thank you for seeing me, Mrs. Merrill.”

“Miss Wade,” the severely attractive, forty-one-year-old brunette corrected. “I resumed use of my maiden name when George and I split.”

Like the previous victims, Miss Elizabeth Wade, nee Merrill, nee Wade, didn't seem too upset at the victim's loss. Miss Wade didn't appear to have been grieving at all. Her eyes showed no sign of puffiness, and her hair and makeup were flawless.

After meeting at the station, the investigators decided to dig deeper into the three victims and see what might connect the three of them besides the fact that they were, apparently, not easy to get along with. Or if that *was* the connection, then who would have interacted with all three of them?

David was looking into Gigi Demtrious while Tom looked into Gerald Conway. Faith was responsible for the latest victim, George Merrill, and so was now interviewing his ex-wife.

“Miss Wade,” Faith corrected with a professional smile.

Elizabeth returned a brief smile of her own, then poured coconut milk into a blender. “I hope you don't think me rude,” she said, “I always enjoy my lunchtime smoothie at one-thirty. I have to be strict with my diet if I hope to maintain my figure.”

“No problem at all, ma'am,” Faith replied.

“Would you like me to make you some?” Elizabeth asked.

“No, thank you,” Faith replied. “I just ate.”

Elizaeth offered a *suit yourself* shrug and pressed the button on the blender. The machine came to life with a loud whir, and Faith glanced around the small but well-appointed apartment. Elizabeth was a conservative decorator but a talented one. Everything was arranged tastefully and precisely. Faith

wouldn't be surprised to open Miss Wade's underwear drawer and find everything arranged by style and color.

Elizabeth stopped the blender and poured a tall glass of soupy green liquid. Despite looking horrific, the drink actually smelled all right, at least from where Faith sat.

Elizabeth sat across from Faith and smiled at Turk. "What a lovely dog," she said. "What's his name?"

"Turk," Faith replied.

"Well, Turk," Elizabeth said to the dog. "You are just the most precious thing I've ever seen in my life."

She reached for Faith, and Faith and Turk both waited patiently while she scratched under his chin and made smoochie noises at him. "I just love dogs," she said when she sat up. "Mine's at my sister's today visiting my nephews." She shook her head. "It's too bad George never felt the same way about dogs. I would have dealt with everything else if he had a soft spot for dogs like I do."

"Everything else?" Faith prompted.

"George was not an easy person to love," Elizabeth replied. She took a sip of her smoothie and wiped a thin line of green from her upper lip with a folded napkin she produced from somewhere underneath the table. "He was a very angry man." Faith raised an eyebrow, and Elizabeth clarified, "He wasn't violent." She chuckled. "He was too lazy to be violent. He was just angry all the time. Everything was sore, and everyone was annoying, and his boss was shitty and he hated that he had to work all the time and could I please just wash the dishes tonight and let him wash the next load?"

She stopped and seemed to remember Faith was still there. "Sorry," she said, smiling sheepishly. "We split up three years ago, but sometimes the memories just kick the door back down." Her smile faded, and for the first time, Faith saw something like grief in her expression. "I guess there won't be any more of those."

"Were you on speaking terms with George?" Faith asked.

"Depends on what you mean by speaking terms," she said. "We didn't tear each other's throats out anymore, but we

weren't friends. I think I talked to him once in the past six months just to get some clarification on taxes from when we were married."

Faith winced inwardly at the unfortunate analogy. "How did he seem to you when you spoke with him last?"

She shrugged. "Fine. He just gave me the info I needed and asked how I was doing. I said I was doing well, and he said that's good to hear. We talked about my job a little while, then we hung up."

"Did he seem depressed or wistful when you spoke to him? Possibly anxious?"

"No, he seemed fine. He wasn't asking about me because he missed me, he was just being polite." She tilted her head slightly. "Come to think of it, that *was* unusual. The only time I'd ever seen him polite before was when he was with a client. Could that mean something?"

It probably didn't mean anything substantial that he was polite to Elizabeth, but the fact that he was almost never polite with anyone else tracked with the personalities of the other two victims.

She smiled at Faith. "Probably not, but I appreciate you talking with me. If there's anything else you think of, please give me a call."

"I will," she said with a smile, accepting Faith's extended hand. Her smile faded again, and once more, a shadow of grief crossed her face. "You know, I really did love him," she said. "If he hadn't done what he did to Sharky, I might have stayed with him."

Faith's ears perked up. "Sharky?"

"My teacup poodle. He was the best little dog I've ever had."

Tears welled at the corners of her eyes, and she opened her handbag and primly retrieved a small silk handkerchief. She dabbed the corners of her eyes and said, "After what George did, I couldn't stand to be around him anymore. Honestly, it's a surprise that *I* could keep my cool when talking to him."

“What did he do?” Faith asked.

Elizabeth’s mouth twisted into a frown that showed far more hate than Faith would have thought possible in a woman with so much self-control. “He stepped on him,” she said, each word a curse. “Sharky was walking to his food bowl and that fat asshole stepped on him.”

She met Faith’s eyes and said, “Then he left him there. He stepped on Sharky and literally crushed him to death, then he just left him there for me to ‘clean up’ when I got home. I won’t lie to you, Special Agent, I spent a while seriously considering stabbing him to death while he slept. In the end, I just left, though. It wouldn’t bring Sharky back to put myself in danger.”

Faith hadn’t considered Elizabeth a suspect, but after the hate in her eyes and voice and the admission she’d just made, she decided she had to at least confirm her whereabouts for the nights of the murders. She brought it up and Elizabeth said, “Oh! Of course. I should have thought of that.”

She fished in her purse and pulled out a receipt. “This is for my hotel at the marketing conference in Pittsburgh. Not sure why the hell they held it in Pittsburgh this year, but anyway, that shows I rented a room from last Thursday up until this Thursday. As far as last night, I was home. I left my lights on and my car was in the driveway, so maybe my neighbors could confirm I was here.”

“I’ll follow up with them,” Faith replied. “Thank you.”

“So they’re all jerks,” Tom said when they reconvened at his office, “but other than that, they don’t seem to be connected in any way.”

“They’re connected,” Faith said, “and that is how they’re connected. We just need to find out who would have interacted with all three of them.”

“Maybe a marriage counselor?” Michael suggested. “Elizabeth Merrill was divorced and Jeanie and Gerald Conway didn’t get along.”

“True, but Gigi Demtrious’s husband died years ago.”

“But maybe they saw a marriage counselor while hubby was still alive,” Michael offered.

“Maybe,” Faith said, “but why wait for years before acting on it?”

“Maybe he didn’t,” Michael said. “Maybe he’s responsible for Mr. Demetrious’s death too. Maybe he’s one of those killers who kills once and tries to stay away but ends up drawn back in.”

“Maybe,” Faith said, “but that’s a lot of maybes.”

“Well, the whole damned case is a lot of maybes,” Michael protested, miffed. “That’s what cases are until one of the maybes turns out to be a definitely.”

“I know that, but I don’t want to end up deciding something is true just because it sounds convenient and then find ourselves picking on a coyote again.”

Tom’s lips thinned at that reminder, but he kept his voice professional. “These clients were all well-off,” he said, “could it be some kind of class hatred? Maybe a landscaper or a utility worker who spent his whole life watching how the other half lived, knowing he’d never come close to that level of wealth. Maybe he finally gets pissed off about it, and what sets him off is the fact that these rich assholes are so selfish they don’t even realize how horrible they are.”

“That’s oddly specific,” Michael quipped. “Are you sure you’re not projecting your own feelings?”

“I have my differences with the upper class,” Tom answered seriously, “but that doesn’t mean I’m wrong. Plenty of people get murdered out of envy.”

“True,” Faith allowed, “but if that was the motive, it wouldn’t be out of the blue. There would have been someone who visited all three people regularly enough to know that

they were jerks and to plan a time and place to take them and kill them.”

“Maybe there was someone like that,” Tom said. “Some wealthy people think of service workers as servants, not humans. They wouldn’t think about them as potential killers any more than I would be afraid of my toaster stabbing me to death.”

“But who?” Michael asked. “They lived in three different neighborhoods that were too far away from each other for me to believe the same landscaping crew or meter reader visited all of them.”

A lightbulb went off in Faith’s head. “Did Gigi Demetrious have a dog?”

Michael frowned. “Yeah, Olivia mentioned she had a dog, but she lost it a while ago. Do you think that’s the connection?”

“It could be,” Faith said, “Elizabeth Merrill had a dog, a little teacup poodle. George stepped on it and killed it, then left the body for Elizabeth to clean up when she got home.”

Tom made a face and turned away. Turk growled nauseatingly. Michael clenched his teeth and said, “Fucking prick. Lends a kind of poetic justice to how he died.”

His and Tom’s eyes widened when Michael said that. Tom had said earlier that maybe the killer considered his victims’ deaths to be poetic justice. Maybe the justice was that they had been cruel to dogs and then killed by dogs.

“So we have one man who killed a dog callously and a woman who lost her dog and presumably made no attempt to find it. Now we just need to know if Gerald Conway had a dog.”

“Did Jeanie mention anything to you?”

“I didn’t ask,” he said. “Here, let me call her.”

He dialed the number from his desk phone, and a moment later said, “Mrs. Conway? It’s Detective Watkins again. I had one more question to ask you. Did George, by any chance, have a dog?” He paused a moment, then grinned at the two

agents. “I see,” he said, “How would you say he was with the dog?” Another pause. “I’m sorry to hear that. One more question, actually, ma’am. Did the dog see a vet or groomer regularly? Maybe a dog walker? Excellent. Yes, please.”

He grabbed a notepad and pen and said, “All right, go ahead.”

Faith and Michael crowded around him and looked over his shoulder as he wrote *Goldwood Dog Grooming*, followed by a phone number. “Wonderful. Do you know if he spoke with anyone in particular at the groomer? No, that’s all right, I’ll follow up with the Groomer. Thank you, Mrs. Conway.”

He hung up. “Well, you all saw it. Now we have to see if the others brought their own dogs there.”

Michael and Faith stepped away and dialed their respective numbers. When Elizabeth answered, Faith said, “Hi, Miss Wade, thank you for taking my call. We’re following up on a lead in your ex-husband’s mother. I was wondering if you took your dog to a groomer regularly?”

“Yes, I took him to Sunrise Groomers on Saguaro and Goldwood Boulevard. Why? You don’t think someone there killed George, do you?”

“We’re just looking into some loose ends right now, Miss Wade,” Faith replied, hiding her disappointment that Elizabeth’s dog didn’t go to Goldwood Dog Grooming. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” She paused a moment, then said, “Am I a terrible person for not being upset that George is dead?”

“That’s outside of my wheelhouse, Miss Wade,” Faith said. “As long as you didn’t kill him, that’s enough for me.”

She hung up before Elizabeth could respond. She had good reasons to be callous about Gerald’s death, but Faith didn’t feel like dealing with her thinly veiled triumph over it, especially after seeing what seemed like her best lead evaporate.

She returned to Tom’s desk, and when she saw Michael’s expression, she knew already he had been disappointed as well.

“No luck? She asked.

“A private groomer who would visit once a week in one of those mobile grooming vans. Called itself the Happy Paws Grooming Company.”

“Lovely,” Faith said irritably.

“Hold on now,” Tom said. “Before you all get upset, let’s look at the employee history of these businesses. Goldwood’s not a one-horse town, but we’re not a big city either. Odds are, someone’s worked at both of these groomers. The mobile one’s a little more concerning, but it’s worth looking into before we give up.”

“Sheriff Watkins,” Michael said drily, pointing at Tom. “The master of grabbing at straws.”

“You don’t know until you know,” Tom replied.

The two brick-and-mortar businesses gave Tom the usual runaround about not revealing their employees’ personal information but eventually provided him a list of employees from the past five years—the state mandated records requirement. The lists were surprisingly long for such a small time period in such a small town, so it took a while poring over both lists before they found a match.

“Here,” Faith said, pointing at a name. “Foster Chase. He worked for Sunrise Groomers five years ago for two years, then moved to Goldwood Dog Grooming. He was there up until last year, it looks like,”

“When he founded Happy Paws Grooming Company,” Tom added, turning his computer monitor so the two agents could see Foster’s smiling face on the home page of happypaws.com. “Looks like we found our guy.”

“Our next person of interest, at least,” Faith said. “Tom, stay here and see if you can find anyone else who might be connected with all three victims. Michael, let’s go talk to Foster Chase.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Michael stole a glance at Faith as he drove toward Foster's home address. His partner showed no sign of anxiety. She looked excited to follow up on this lead, as she always did whenever there was a good lead in an investigation. She stared intently out of the windshield, stroking Turk's fur absently, and didn't seem to notice Michael's gaze.

His worry relaxed a little, but only a little. He knew that Faith had pressured David to leave town just as she had pressured him into asking Ellie to leave town. From what he overheard at the end of her conversation with him, he wasn't happy about it.

Honestly, Michael wasn't happy about it either. He knew Faith was overreacting to the note that Gordon's killer had left. Hell, he was half sure that the killer wasn't even the Copycat Killer but some other individual who used the Donkey Killer's name to throw the FBI off the scent.

But he had still sent Ellie away. He had still told the woman he planned to marry that she needed to leave town with no notice because his partner at the Bureau, whom he had dated for a year before he met Ellie and who had been flirting with career ruin ever since, was paranoid, and reacting poorly to her friend's death.

What kind of power did Faith have over people that she could convince them to abandon all reason just because she had a hunch?

Then again, in the ten years he had worked with Faith, her hunches were nearly always right. Still, it was sobering to think that he would so willingly disrupt Ellie's life at Faith's unsubstantiated whim.

The ghost of his old argument with Ellie resurfaced. She had accused him of still having feelings for Faith. At the time, he dismissed her suspicions as absurd, but since then, he had paid more attention to himself around her, and he wasn't sure

he liked what he saw. He didn't want her romantically, he was sure of it, but he still cared for her more deeply than anyone but Ellie, and the first night at the hotel he had thought a little too long and a little too curiously about what Faith looked like naked in the shower.

And he had sent Ellie away after putting up almost no fight at all. Worse, he had done so, believing that Faith had no reason to suspect danger. He had essentially sent Ellie away to make Faith feel better.

He might have to start distancing himself from Faith. Not a lot, just a little. Just enough that she didn't feel a need to treat him and everyone else in his life like her responsibility. Just enough that his memory of their long-dead relationship didn't feel a need to invade his very much living relationship with Ellie.

Just enough so that he didn't have to be tied so completely to a woman who had lost most of what made her who she was when Jethro Trammell had paralyzed and nearly killed her.

That thought sickened him, and he banished it from his conscious mind and turned his focus to the task at hand. "Should we try calling the Happy Paws number?" he asked, "to confirm he's not on a call?"

"No, I don't want to warn him we're coming," she replied.

"Remember that almost got us hurt last time," Michael reminded her.

She shook her head. "Franks' dogs wouldn't have hurt us. They were the best-trained dogs I've ever seen." Turk lifted his head, and she added, "Besides you, of course."

He lowered his head again with a satisfied snort.

"That's all well and good," Michael said, "but we got lucky that time."

"So we won't break and enter," she said irritably, "but we won't give him time to hide evidence either."

"Fair enough," Michael said.

They reached the address two minutes later. Foster wasn't home, unless he kept his grooming van somewhere else. They

approached the front door just in case.

There was no answer to Faith's knock or to her second one. Michael called out, "FBI! Anybody home?"

They hear a yip, followed by two barks, followed by a chorus of barks and snarls and the skittering of paws on a hard floor. Faith looked at Michael, then prepared to break down the door. Michael grabbed her shoulder. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

"Getting inside," she said. "That's probable cause."

"I don't think a judge is going to have as loose of a definition of probable cause as you do," Michael replied.

Faith rolled her eyes. "Would you feel safer waiting in the car, Mikey?" she asked sarcastically.

"All right," he said, "you want to go in like cowboys, fine, but can you please use your lockpicking kit instead of shattering his door. I want it to be able to close in case we open the door to hell."

"Christ, you're such a baby," Faith grouched.

She reached for her lockpicking kit and pulled out the bobby pin and the small screwdriver. The dogs continued to bark and skitter on the other side of the door, and Michael placed a hand on his service pistol. Just in case.

Turk tensed, his tail switching back and forth as he prepared to respond to any threat the opened door might reveal.

Michael heard a loud click. "Got it," Faith said. She straightened and put her bobby pin and screwdriver away in the small case she carried it in. "All right," she said. "You open the door so your hands have something better to do than shoot blindly."

He glared at her but took his hand off of his pistol and grabbed the door handle. "On three," he said. "One, two, THREE!"

He pulled the door open and reached immediately for his weapon, but the dogs were on them before his fingers closed over the butt.

Faith looked down at her ankles, where two teacup Pomeranians yipped and wagged their puffball tails as they planted their forelegs on her shins and looked up at her with bright inquisitive eyes. A Scottish terrier joined a pug and an excited French bulldog in a chase around Michael's legs, pausing when they were in front of him to yip so exuberantly all four paws left the ground with each bark.

Two chihuahas approached Turk cautiously. Turk looked up at Faith, confused, then lowered his head to gingerly sniff the smaller dogs. The tiny animals seemed satisfied with the greeting and trotted up to the bigger dog, leaning against his forepaws and staring wide-eyed up at the two strange humans.

Faith looked at Michael and glanced at his hand, which still hovered over his shoulder holster. He lowered it and looked down at the three dogs running circuits around his leg. "Hello," he said drily. "I'm Special Agent Michael Prince, and this is Special Agent Faith Bold. The big guy is our K9 unit, Turk. Do you mind if we ask you a few questions?"

The Frenchie yipped and cocked its head questioningly.

"Well," Faith said. "Maybe he keeps the big dogs out back."

"Excuse me?" a strange voice called. "Hello?"

The two agents turned to see Foster Chase leaving a large panel van with a smiling cartoon dog and a stylized pawprint emblazoned on the side above HAPPY PAWS GROOMING—WE LEAVE YOUR PUP SMILING! in bubble print. He approached the house, his angry frown changing to confusion when he saw the FBI vests. "What is this?" he asked. "Can I help you?" He looked down at Turk. "Is this about an appointment? I usually prefer to come to the client."

"It's not an appointment," Faith said, "We're here to talk to you about some old clients of yours."

He looked even more confused. "To me? Why me?"

"We have reason to believe that a series of recent murders in the local area are being committed by dogs trained by their owner to attack humans," Michael explained. "The victims thus far all received grooming services from you in the past."

“Oh God,” Foster said, paling. “How horrible. You don’t think it was *me*, do you?”

“Maybe we should talk inside,” Michael suggested. “Behind closed doors.”

Foster looked between the two agents, then down at Turk. The chihuahuas had practically buried themselves in Turk’s fur, a state of being Turk endured with saintly patience. That sight apparently convinced Foster. “All right,” he said, “Let me get my two girls.”

He walked back to the van. Faith and Michael shared a glance.

“Should we go with him?” Michael asked. “Just in case he pulls a runner?”

Before Faith could respond, Foster opened the passenger door and called, “Martha! Trixie!”

Two Dachshunds appeared on the passenger seat. Foster carefully picked them up one at a time and set them on the ground. They trotted toward the strangers, their tiny legs pumping furiously as they greeted the strangers.

“They’re my newest,” Foster explained. “They get separation anxiety when they’re apart from me. I’m going to start weaning them next week when I take time off, but for now, I’m avoiding torn furniture and bladder control issues.”

Michael nodded, not sure how to respond to that.

“Are these all the dogs you have?” Faith asked.

“That’s it,” Foster replied with a smile. “Martha, Trixie, Benny, Joe, Teacup, Scooter, Pancho, Lefty—that’s the two chihuahuas making friends with your Shepherd—Genevieve and Honey.”

Michael lifted an eyebrow at the second to last name. “Genevieve?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s from a children’s book. The character’s name was Gigi Genevieve something-or-other. I was going to go with Gigi, but that reminded me of one of my less... fulfilling clients, so I went with Genevieve instead.”

“Would that client happen to have been Gigi Demetrious?”

“Demetrious,” he said. “Sounds familiar. Hey, did I offer you guys any coffee yet?”

“We’re all right, thank you,” Faith replied.

“Do you mind if I make some for myself?” he asked.

“Go ahead,” Michael replied.

Foster squeezed past the two agents, navigating the sea of tiny dogs with practiced ease. Michael could imagine how furious he might be at a man who couldn’t or didn’t care to avoid tiny dogs and left the crushed body of the one he stepped on for his wife to “clean up.”

“Gigi Demetrious,” Foster repeated, pouring water from a pitcher into the tabletop coffee maker. “Did she have a little King Charles’ Spaniel? A red one?”

Faith looked at Michael, who reddened when he realized he hadn’t gotten the name of the breed of Gigi Demetrious’s dog. “Ms. Demetrious was about five-foot-six with natural blonde hair and blue eyes. She lived in—”

“Yep, I know her,” Foster interrupted. His lips thinned in distaste. “She took shitty care of her dog. His fur was always matted when I got to her, and I could feel the poor animal’s ribs each time I bathed her. Honestly, I don’t think the dog would have even survived if the daughter hadn’t snuck him food every now and then.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Mr. Chase, can you verify your whereabouts last Sunday night, last Wednesday night and last Friday night?”

Foster swallowed, seeming to realize for the first time that he might be in trouble here. “At night? No, not really. Maybe the neighbors could confirm my van was parked in the driveway. I mean, I was here, but I was alone, and dogs don’t speak English, unfortunately.” He smiled at his weak joke, but his smile faded when the two agents didn’t return the expression. “Hey, what’s going on?” he asked. “Am I in trouble?”

“Do you think you should be?” Michael asked.

“I mean, I wouldn’t know why,” he said. “I just washed her dog. I didn’t... I mean... what happened?”

“What do you think happened?” Faith asked.

“Well, I’m guessing she was kidnapped or killed or something,” Foster replied. “Why else would the FBI be here?”

“Mr. Chase, did you know Gerald Conway or George Merrill?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. Did I groom their dogs too?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

Foster lifted a hand nervously, the coffee forgotten. “Hey, man, I see a lot of people. I remember the dogs, but I only remember the owners if they’re assholes.”

“These two were assholes,” Michael confirmed. “Gerald Conway, middle-aged, condescending.”

“Do you remember what kind of dog he had?”

Michael looked at Faith, who shook her head. Tom hadn’t gotten that information either. Christ, they were off to a shitty start on this lead.

“What about George Merrill? His wife had a teacup poodle.”

Foster’s eyes shot open wide. “Oh yeah! That asshole! God, he was a prick with a capital P! Did you hear what he did to Sharky?”

“We heard,” Faith said, “It makes his death seem sort of justified, wouldn’t you say?”

“He’s dead?”

Michael and Faith shared another look, and Michael decided to be more direct. “Mr. Chase, to be clear, we’re investigating the murders of Gerald Conway, George Merrill and Gigi Demetrious. All three of them received grooming services from you at one point. Gerald Conway saw you at Goldwood Dog Grooming Company, George Merrill at Sunrise Groomers and Gigi Demetrious from your mobile service, Happy Paws. All three of them were killed by a pack of dogs, and all three of them, it looks like, were less than pleasant dog owners.”

“That’s putting it lightly, Agent,” Foster said with a frown, seeming to forget the fact that he was suspected of being their murderer. “Gerald Conway. I remember him now. He abused his dog, too. He had a little Pomeranian. The poor thing shook like a leaf every time I saw it. It only relaxed when he left. George Merrill, as you know, crushed Sparky to death and left him there for his wife, the one who actually cared about him, to find. Gigi treated her dog like he was another accessory. He had been lost for three days when I showed up to groom him. She didn’t even bother to tell me he was missing. When I told her I was there to groom Trotter, she said, ‘Who? Oh, the dog. Yeah, he’s gone.’ Look, I didn’t kill them, but I’m not going to act like I’m sorry they’re dead.”

Michael had had enough of hearing that. Sure, these people were jerks to their pets, but they were still people. Their families might not have had the best relationships with them, but Genevieve was still hurt to lose her mother, and Jeanie Conway had built a life with her husband. So what if it was a rough life? It was a life, and someone who thought he was

being some sort of avenging angel had murdered them in cold blood.

He narrowed his eyes and took a step toward Foster, who paled and backed up reflexively. “To be clear, Mr. Chase,” he said, “We think you might have murdered them. Start convincing us you didn’t.”

“I didn’t!” he replied, his voice almost a squeak. “Honestly! These are all the dogs I have! Even put together, they couldn’t kill an adult.”

“They’re not all the dogs you have access to,” Faith pointed out.

“I don’t take my clients’ dogs home!” he protested. “I go to my clients and do the work there. That’s the whole point! To groom the dogs where their owners can see and not have to be worried about their pets being mistreated. Also for me to see and report any abuse.”

“You never reported the abuse Gigi Demetrious leveled against her dog,” Michael pointed out.

Foster frowned a little. “What she did was mean, but not quite abuse. Trotter was thin but not starving. The daughter—who I did *not* know was named Genevieve before now, by the way—took enough care of him that I couldn’t justify taking him away.”

“But you’ve taken other dogs away,” Faith asked.

“No!” he said, his pitch rising to a squeak again. “No, I never took anyone’s dogs away! Look, if I thought someone was abusing the dog, I would have reported it to animal control. I’m not a hero. I wouldn’t have done some vigilante dognapping thing. Look at me. Do I look like someone who could murder people in cold blood?”

“You’d be amazed.” Michael replied. “Foster, we’re going to follow up with your former employers and review your interactions with the victims. Is there anything you want to tell us now so we don’t hear something from them and wonder why we didn’t hear it from you?”

Foster hesitated and looked to his left. *Bingo.*

Michael lifted an eyebrow, and Foster rolled his eyes and sighed anxiously. “Look, I got into it with Gerald Conway a little bit, all right?”

Michael cocked his head, and Foster said, “Okay, George Merrill too. But I didn’t do anything! I just... yelled at them a little.”

“Ooh, storytime!” Michael said, pulling a chair away from the kitchen table and sitting on the edge, his hands resting lightly on his knees. Typically interrogators wanted their suspects sitting and themselves standing to intimidate the suspects, but Michael found the uncanny valley of an upbeat investigator projecting harmlessness everywhere but his eyes to be more effective at breaking down walls. “I can’t wait to hear all about both events,” he told Foster. “Every single detail.”

Foster looked between the two agents, then at Turk. Turk dipped his head in a nod, and Foster, oddly, seemed to take courage from that. He took a breath and said, “Okay, I saw Gerald Conway hitting his dog almost every time he brought her in. She was a beautiful Collie mix, but she had been abused to the point of severe anxiety. She would tremble constantly in his presence and cringe every time he spoke to her. I used to get so pissed off, but I didn’t say anything because it was my first job living on my own, and I thought I should just be cool. But one day, they came in and she bumped into his ankle, and he kicked her. He fucking kicked her!”

He paused, possibly waiting for the two agents to exclaim in outrage. Michael certainly felt outraged, but the fact that Gerald Conway had been reduced to a skeleton a week ago still bothered him more than the fact that he was abusive to his dog.

After a moment, Foster continued. “The poor thing let go of her bladder on the floor. Gerald got this red-faced, angry look and started walking toward her with his hand raised. I remember he said, ‘Minx, you little bitch,’ in this horrible voice.

“I couldn’t take it anymore. I jumped in front of him and said, ‘If you put your hands on that dog again, I’ll call the

sheriffs and report you!”

“And did you put your hands on him?” Faith asked.

“No,” he said, reddening. “Gerald shoved me out of the way. I hit the counter and fell to the ground, and he looked at me and said, ‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’ Well, my boss came out to the front, and when she heard what happened, she fired me on the spot. She didn’t care that I had seen Gerald fucking *kick* his dog. She just wanted the employee who couldn’t mind his own business out of her way.”

“That must have angered you a lot,” Michael said.

“Not enough to kill someone,” Foster said defiantly.

Michael lifted his hands placatingly, still wearing his diamond-hard grin. “Tell me about George Merrill.”

Foster adopted the flat-faced rage he wore earlier when talking about George. “He’s lucky I never saw him,” he said. “Honestly, agent, I’d either be dead or you’d be handcuffing me now if I ever saw George in person. That dick got what he deserved. You can be upset with me for saying that if you want, but it’s the truth. When I found out what happened, I quit Sunrise. I decided I needed to work for myself so if I caught anyone treating their dogs like that again, I could report them. I wouldn’t kill them,” he insisted. “One of the commitments I made to myself was that I wouldn’t allow myself to lose control the way I would have with Merrill. I can’t help anyone in jail. Of course, as it turns out, Gigi was the worst owner I’ve seen since leaving Sunrise, and she was nowhere near as bad as the other two were.”

Michael and Faith looked at each other, and he could see she was weighing everything she’d heard like he was.

Michael turned back to Foster and folded his hands. “Mr. Chase,” he said, “I’m inclined to believe you, but the fact that you don’t have an alibi we can verify for the nights of the murders and your own admitted conflicts with two of the three victims make it hard for me to take your word for it.”

“Can’t you call my clients and... no wait, don’t call them. I don’t want them to know I’m being suspected of murder.”

“If we bring you in for murder, they’ll find out from the evening news,” Faith pointed out.

Foster released a sound that reminded Michael uncomfortably, though perhaps appropriately, of a dog’s whine. He ran his hands through his hair and said, “Okay, if you have to call them, can you at least say you’re investigating something like dog thefts, and you want to make sure I never left anywhere with their dogs? That’s what you need to verify, right? That I’m not borrowing big dogs to go kill people?”

“We can avoid the topic of the murder investigation,” Faith agreed, “but the alibi is more concerning, if I’m being honest.”

“I know,” Foster said with a whine again. “I mean... I don’t walk around living my life thinking, ‘Hey, I should probably take pictures of myself everywhere I go in case someone suspects me of being a serial killer.’”

“That’s fair,” Michael said, “but you have to give us something.”

He lifted his hands and let them drop. “Other than the neighbors maybe—hopefully—noticing that I arrived home and didn’t leave, I don’t know. Wait!” His eyes flew open with excitement. “I ordered pizza on Friday! Yeah, I was binging Star Trek, and I ordered a pizza at eleven-thirty from the Pizza Parlor. They’re the only ones that deliver that late. I remember the delivery driver was named Luigi, and he looked like that chef from those old ravioli cans my parents used to buy when I was a kid. Yeah, if you call him, he can tell you I was here on Friday. I didn’t order anything on Sunday or Wednesday, but I can explain Friday, and if I wasn’t murdering anyone Friday, then I can’t be your guy, can I?”

If Michael were being pedantic, he could mention that the fact that Foster’s anger was directed far more toward Conway and Merrill than to Gigi Demetrious and the fact he had actually gotten into an altercation with Conway meant that he should still be considered a suspect in Conway’s murder, but despite Foster’s anger and the fact that he actually did fit the profile of a serial killer who would hide behind a pack of large dogs rather than risk a physical confrontation himself, Michael bought his story. It was convenient for them to fit Foster into a

profile, but there were too many holes. If the pizza shop confirmed that he had indeed ordered pizza the night Merrill died, then he was probably not their guy. Merrill was the only one he seemed to truly hate, and it was his murder for which he had the alibi.

“We’ll follow up, Mr. Chase,” Michael replied. “In the meantime, do yourself a favor and stay in town. We might need to contact you again.”

Foster bobbed his head up and down excitedly, relieved that the agents were coming around to his side. “Sure!” he said, “You betcha.”

The three of them left, gently prying themselves away from the dogs. Pancho and Lefty seemed particularly upset to lose Turk and followed him nearly all the way to the street before finally turning back to the house.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was dusk when they returned to the hotel. Michael called the Pizza Parlor, and after verifying that Foster had indeed ordered a large thin crust with extra cheese and pepperoni, he ordered them a Chicago-style deep dish with extra cheese. Faith declined to participate in the pizza, so Michael ordered her a chicken ceasar salad.

Michael ate mechanically, a sour frown on his face. Turk ate his food next to the bed, watching a movie about talking dogs that Faith had found on one of the family channels. He seemed unperturbed by the dead end in the case.

Faith felt a lot more like Michael than Turk at the moment. The Boss's throwaway case to get her away from the Copycat Killer was proving to be far more of a challenge than it seemed it would be at first. The killer's M.O. read like a bad joke at first glance, but it was proving to be the most brilliant method for avoiding detection they had come across. There was less evidence to follow up on than any other case Faith could recall, and the two good leads they had found turned up empty. One was the junkyard Santa Claus, and the other was enjoying a pizza while George Merrill was getting eaten alive.

She decided to take a walk. These solo excursions often helped clear her mind and allowed her to sift through cases and find connections she couldn't see before. She stood, and Turk followed her. "Going out?" Michael asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, I need some fresh air."

"Take your keycard," he said, "I might be in the shower when you get back."

A transient memory of showering with Michael when they were together flitted across Faith's mind.

"All right," she replied, grabbing the keycard and shoving it into the back pocket of her jeans, then quickly leaving the room, Turk at her side.

She recalled the moment that passed between them at the field office the day she discovered Gordon's murder. She didn't think often of hers and Michael's relationship. It had been over almost three times as long as it had lasted, but the feelings would return occasionally and with more power than she cared to admit.

He was, in many ways, her first love. She had experienced puppy love in high school and a brief but passionate fling with one of the staff sergeants in her platoon in the Corps sometimes fueled late-night fantasies, but Michael was the first person she could see herself spending her life with. The pressures of the job had snuffed the romance, but sometimes Faith wondered what might have happened if the two of them had made it.

She focused on her breathing and allowed her mind to settle, but this time it didn't settle. Instead, it drifted back to the other frustrating case in her life.

The Copycat Killer was hunting her friends, and she was here trying to wrestle with one of the most elusive killers she'd ever looked for. David would be home in ten days. She knew she wouldn't be able to convince him to stay away longer, and she doubted she could convince Michael to keep Ellie out of town. The two of them would be safe as long as Michael and Faith were home, but if they were called on a case again, the Copycat Killer would jump at that chance.

Faith wondered if she was losing her touch. She knew it was a foolish conclusion to reach, but she couldn't help wondering. In ten years with the Bureau, she'd never lost a single case. The closest she'd come was the Donkey Killer, but even if she had been injured, she had still managed to lead Michael and the other agents to Trammell.

Since then, she had been nothing less than a force of nature in terms of her case-solving skills. She had shown cracks in other areas, but her intuitive and deductive skills remained sharp as ever.

Except when it came to the Copycat Killer. Twice, she had suspected people who were clearly not possible suspects. One of those had been the man who was now the most recent

victim of the Copycat Killer. For whatever reason, her judgment when it came to the Copycat Killer was frayed.

No, not whatever reason. She couldn't think clearly about the Copycat Killer because he was using the Donkey Killer's MO, and despite over a year of therapy and two years with Turk as an emotional support dog as much as a K9, she was still traumatized by what she suffered.

Not for the first time, she thought the Boss was right to keep her off of the case. She couldn't think objectively about it. She couldn't apply her sharp reasoning skills to it because she couldn't reason.

Maybe she should let it go. Maybe she should tell the Boss that she had had enough of the FBI and was ready to move on to the next chapter of her life. Maybe she would join a police department and handle smaller-profile cases and not have to risk her sanity the way she was with the Bureau.

Except that Michael and Ellie were still in danger. David was still in danger. She couldn't just give up when the people she cared most about were under threat from the most prolific serial killer the Bureau had investigated in decades.

She sighed and ran her hands through her hair. Turk nudged her, and she looked down into his empathetic eyes. "Sorry, boy," she said. "Mommy's just losing it again."

Turk barked solemnly, and Faith chuckled. She knelt down and scratched him behind his ears. "I'll be all right," she said, "I'm just having a bad day."

She knelt next to Turk and stroked his fur, allowing her mind to sift through the case some more. She let her thoughts bounce and didn't fixate on anything, letting her mind decide where to stop.

It stopped on Ellie, Michael's wife.

Faith didn't have a good reason to suspect her, and she didn't allow herself to consider the woman seriously. She wouldn't make the mistake of following that rabbit trail again.

But...

Ellie had given Michael the runaround for the entirety of their relationship. Whatever excuses Michael wanted to make for her, she had lied repeatedly about the state of her marriage to the mysterious Frank. She had promised to divorce him repeatedly and only recently actually followed through.

Well, that could mean anything. Divorces were ugly, and Ellie probably didn't want her new relationship to be poisoned by the old relationship she was struggling to sever herself from. If Frank had been the primary breadwinner in their relationship, she might have had very good reason to avoid an official engagement with Michael until the divorce was finalized.

But...

When she visited them for dinner, Ellie had seemed to endure rather than enjoy Michael's attention. She seemed to dole out affection mechanically, as though it were a conditioned response and not a natural reaction. She stiffened when he kissed her and tensed when he put his arm around her.

Well, there could be a reason for that too. Faith didn't know anything about Frank. He could have been abusive, and Ellie's behavior could be a reaction to her past trauma the way Faith's moodiness in the months following the Donkey Killer incident was a reaction to her own trauma. That would also explain her desire to keep the details of her marriage and divorce private. If Michael found out about any abuse, he would absolutely go after Frank and get himself in trouble, and Ellie wouldn't want that for the new love of her life.

But...

The moment Turk met Ellie, he was every bit as wary and distrustful as Faith was. He wouldn't let Ellie anywhere near Faith and made it clear he didn't want Ellie anywhere near himself either. He wasn't exactly aggressive with her, but he watched her like a hawk and grew very defensive anytime Ellie approached either of them.

Well, Turk had been wrong about things before. He had openly attacked Gordon at the field office, and only Faith's quick reflexes had saved Gordon from a mauling.

But...

Faith's phone rang, startling her out of her ruminations.
"Special Agent Bold."

"Faith, it's Tom."

Faith stood, her senses instantly alert. The deputy's voice was tense and strained. "What is it, Tom?"

"We just found a dog on the street," he said, "some sort of spaniel. There's blood on the muzzle."

Tom waited with animal control at the small playground where the dog had been found. When Faith and Michael arrived, he gestured at the dog. Faith could clearly see it was a King Charles Spaniel. She would bet her badge that the name emblazoned on the small bone-shaped tag that hung from its collar was Trotter.

"Animal control is ready whenever you are. I told them to wait in case you wanted to interact with the dog before it's sedated."

The spaniel gave a bark when it saw Turk and trotted amiably over. Turk peered more closely at it, but when the animal was within five yards, Turk recoiled and stiffened. He started to bare his teeth, but when the spaniel continued to trot over, tail wagging happily, he closed his lips again and simply stared uncomfortably at the smaller dog.

The spaniel stopped in front of Turk and barked in greeting. Turk dipped his head warily, and the spaniel trotted over to Faith.

Trotting turned out to be appropriate. As Faith suspected, the dog was none other than the infamous Trotter, former neglected companion of one Gigi Demetrioius.

Faith looked at Michael. "This is Gigi's dog."

"And it's eaten recently."

Faith turned back to Trotter and saw the caked, dried blood around the muzzle. Trotter stared back at her with bright, friendly eyes and barked his greeting again.

Fatih and Michael shared another look. An animal control officer with a net approached, looking questioningly at Faith. Faith shook her head. "A leash is fine, officer. This dog isn't vicious."

"But the blood," Michael pointed out.

"I know," Faith replied. "Something doesn't add up here."

"Are we sure this is one of the dogs and he didn't just pick up a rat?"

"It's possible he's just been lost since Gigi lost him, but..." she ran her hands up and down Trotter's sides, to the animal's obvious pleasure. His midsection was well-filled out, perhaps even very slightly overweight, "I doubt it. Someone's been feeding him." She looked over his coat. "And bathing and grooming him."

"Well, we need to get him to the station," Tom replied. "We can confirm the identity of the blood on his muzzle and maybe we'll get lucky and find fingerprints or DNA from whoever's been feeding him."

"Yeah," Faith said, "sounds good."

She picked up the small dog, who settled into her arms and closed its eyes. Michael stiffened a little, seeing her hold the dog, but violence was clearly nowhere near Trotter's mind as he snuggled and promptly fell asleep.

She handed the sleeping dog to the animal control officer and asked, "Be gentle with him. I don't think he's violent."

"We'll be gentle, ma'am," the officer replied, "but he'll still have to be kept in isolation. I'll make sure we interact with him as much as possible, but until we know for sure he's not violent, he'll have to be kept alone."

"That's fine," she said, "Just don't put him down all right?"

"No, ma'am," he replied, shaking his head. "We can't put an animal down if it's evidence in a case."

She smiled briefly and turned to Tom. “Call me if you find anything.”

“We will,” he assured her. “Where are you going?”

“Back to the hotel,” she said. “I’m going to try and sleep. If you find something, call me, though. I don’t mind being woken up for a lead.”

“Will do.”

Back at the hotel, Michael headed to the shower. Faith put the tv on for Turk and told him to sit, then stepped outside. She stayed in front of the window so Turk could see her and called David.

“Hey, Faith,” he said. “What’s up?”

“Hey, David,” she said. “I need your help.”

“What is it?” he said, his voice suddenly serious. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I have a question about the case I’m working on.”

“The case? You want my help with a case?”

“Yes,” she said. “It involves dogs.”

“Ah,” he said, “How can I help?”

She described the main points of the case, keeping names out of the conversation and omitting the little waste of time with the coyote but mentioning the leads they’d followed so far and the oddness of a pack of different-sized dogs cooperating on a kill.

“Well, actually, your coroner is wrong about that,” David replied. “Dogs of all sizes *will* cooperate to hunt food if needed. It doesn’t happen much in the first world, but places like India and Brazil have large populations of strays that cooperate when they hunt.”

“These aren’t strays,” Faith said. “We found a footprint.”

“Right,” he said, “and the King Charles Spaniel wasn’t aggressive at all.”

“Not at all,” Faith said. “If anything, he was relieved to see us. he came right up and asked to be held.”

“So what are you asking me?”

“I’m asking if it’s possible to train dogs to be vicious on command but gentle when not.”

“Well, yeah,” he replied. “That’s why the guard dogs at the junkyard calmed down immediately when they heard their owner call you friend. Maybe don’t break into a junkyard with a pack of guard dogs again, by the way. Since we’re talking.”

“Yeah, but this is different. The guard dogs weren’t vicious. They weren’t trying to herd us, they were trying to hold us. Turk even bit one of them, and the dog he bit didn’t try to bite him back. They just wanted us in one place until their owner arrived. They could have killed us, but they didn’t. These dogs... they didn’t just kill the victims, they tore them apart. They mangled them and ate parts of them. It wasn’t like trained guard dogs, it was like a pack of wild dogs going after prey.’

“Hmm,” David said. “It *is* unusual for a dog to be both vicious like that and desirous of companionship from strangers. Obviously, vicious dogs exist, but it’s odd that the spaniel could have contributed to killing someone and then asked to be picked up by a complete stranger.”

“So there’s no way this is possible without some sort of human intervention,” Faith reasoned, “but what kind of intervention could prompt this kind of behavior?”

“Well,” David said, “I heard that there was a study done about the efficacy of using pheromones to calm vicious dogs. The idea was that by using pheromones that facilitate cooperation similar to those released by wolves in packs, they could rehabilitate vicious dogs to be docile. I don’t think the study went anywhere, but I suppose it’s possible that someone could be doing the reverse and releasing pheromones to trigger the dogs’ primal hunting or defense instincts. That would be difficult to control, though. The facilitator would have to also release soothing pheromones to calm the dogs, and those pheromones wouldn’t work right away. That might explain why your killer waited in the shadows. Or he could just have done a flawless job training them to view him as the alpha. If they were ingrained to believe he was an absolute authority,

then that might be enough to bridge the gap between the effects of the alarm pheromone and the effects of the soothing pheromone.”

Faith felt her excitement grow. “That’s wonderful information, David!” she said. “Do you remember the name of the study?”

“The name? I’m not sure. I know it was published in *Vets Weekly* about three or four years ago. I didn’t pay much attention to it, to be honest. It seemed kind of out there, if you know what I mean.”

“Well,” Faith replied. “Serial killers do have a reputation for being out there.”

“Good point,” David conceded. “So if I help you solve the case, do I win a medal or something.”

“Or something,” she said, grinning. “I think you’ll like it even more than a medal.”

“Wow,” David said, “I should let you turn my life upside down more often. You’re generous when you feel guilty.”

“Don’t push it,” she said, still grinning. “I’ll see you later, baby.”

“See you later.”

She hung up and headed inside. Michael was dressed for bed, but when he saw the look on her face, he said, “I guess I should get dressed again, huh?”

“Not yet,” Faith said. “In fact, you should nap now and get whatever rest you can. I’ll wake you up if I find something.”

Michael shook his head. “I won’t be able to rest now that I know you’re onto something. Spill it.”

Faith shared the details of her conversation with David. When she finished, Michael said, “Wow. What’s with people using chemicals all the time now? What happened to good old-fashioned blunt objects?”

“New generation, new criminals, I guess,” Faith said. “Still not enough to stump us.”

“True that,” Michael said. “We’re the originals.”

Faith opened her computer and started searching for the study. She found it ten minutes later from an issue three years and four months old. She opened the FBI database and plugged in the names of each contributing author. A minute later, she had a hit.

“Got him,” she said.

Michael leaned close enough that she could smell his aftershave. It was a familiar smell, but she was excited enough by the lead not to fall into nostalgia.

“Dr. Karl Vanheusen,” she said. “Who just happens to live right here in Goldwood.”

“Well, well,” Michael said. “Looks like we’re paying someone a late-night visit.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He took a deep breath and forced a smile as he knocked on the door. It opened a crack, and a little old lady peeked her head warily at the stranger knocking on her door as dark rapidly settled on Goldwood.

“Can I help you?” she asked, her voice a mixture of that wariness and annoyance.

“I’m so sorry to bother you, ma’am,” he said. “I’m looking for my dog. He’s a King Charles Spaniel.”

She stared blankly at him. He pushed down his irritation and said, “They’re a small breed with long ears and long red-brown fur. His name is Trotter. He got out of his fence this morning, and I’ve been looking for him all day. Have you seen or heard anything at all?”

He really had been out all day. He had knocked on every door in his neighborhood looking for Trotter. He had explored the local park where he sometimes took Trotter on walks and even risked a return to the central park to look for him. In his desperation, he had even taken Prince Edward out to look for him, but the old dog lost Trotter’s scent at the main boulevard a half-mile from the house.

At least they hadn’t found a body.

Yet, a dark voice reminded him.

He pushed that voice away and repeated, “Please. I love him so much. If you know anything, please tell me.”

Tears came to his eyes, and those tears finally swayed the older woman. She opened the door a little wider and smiled comfortingly. “Well, I have good news, young man.”

He perked up. “You found him?”

“Well, *I* didn’t find him,” she said, “but the sheriffs did.”

His heart dropped to his feet. He heard it thumping in his eardrums, and it was only through a massive effort of will that he kept smiling. “R—really?”

“Yes, I think so,” she said. “I was walking to the local convenience store—I rarely drive, especially when my destination is so close by—and I saw a commotion taking place at a playground.”

“The playground a block over,” he said.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I heard sirens and saw a bunch of sheriff’s department cars parked in front of the playground. I didn’t stay long, mind you. I’ve learned from my youth to mind my *own* business.”

“But you saw my dog?” he said, “you’re sure of it?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “I looked over and saw a small dog with beautiful red hair, just like you described. A woman from the FBI was picking him up.”

The world spun around him. For a terrifying moment, he thought he might actually faint. He took a deep breath and forced himself to focus on the older woman’s eyes.

She frowned. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice a hoarse croak. “I’m just so relieved. FBI? You’re sure?”

“Oh yes. She was wearing a vest with the letters in bright white. You know, I never knew the FBI rescued dogs.”

“Yeah, me either,” he said. “Well, I should go pick him up. Thank you for your help.”

“Of course, young man,” she said, smiling. “I’m glad I was able.”

He returned her smile then left, forcing himself to walk calmly back to his car. Once inside, he took two more deep breaths, then forced himself to again be calm as he pulled away.

The FBI? The *FBI*?

This was bad. He hadn’t even considered the possibility that the FBI would get involved. Dammit, he was just trying to make a statement. He just wanted people to stop mistreating their dogs. He thought if he showed people what happened to those who abused their dogs, it would prompt people to change. He didn’t even think about the fact that he had now

committed three very public murders in a short span of time. Of course, they would be looking for him.

But the *FBI*?

If they found him, then it would be over. He would be taken to prison and held there alone until he was executed. He had no illusions anymore that his work would be seen for what it was. They would see only the death he had caused and spare no thought for the reason for that death. They would put him in prison, and...

Oh God, the dogs. They would take the dogs away. They would take the dogs away and they would give them back to their owners, their horrible, abusive, neglectful owners. The ones whose owners were dead they would take to a shelter.

What a misnomer that was! He had been to those shelters, and they didn't exist to shelter dogs at all. They were slaughterhouses more than shelters.

He was going to be arrested, and his dogs were going to be abused and killed. He couldn't allow that. He had to move.

He had planned for this day. He never imagined it would come, but he was prepared for it. He had a bag with clothing, disguises, IDs and cash in several different currencies. He had a trailer parked in his grandfather's old homestead an hour out of town. He could take the dogs a few at a time to the homestead and leave from there on the trailer. He would travel somewhere safe and live quietly. He had done what he could. He would enjoy his retirement with his family.

His heart ached as he thought of Trotter. There was nothing he could do for him now. If he tried to claim Trotter, the sheriffs would arrest him, and they would take the rest of his dogs away.

He looked wistfully out the window, a last foolish hope taking hold that maybe the old woman was mistaken and the dog the FBI had found was some other puppy. Maybe he would see Trotter walking along the street and rescue him from the shelter to which he was inevitably bound.

He didn't see Trotter, but he did see a lovely old Golden Retriever. Its coat was burnished yellow, but there was a

liberal spray of white at the muzzle. It plodded along with the sad eyes of its breed, and it was beautiful.

He pulled closer to the dog. It was female. “Hi, sweetheart,” he whispered with a smile. The dog didn’t hear him, of course, but he was glad to see her. It brought him a moment’s respite from his pain.

A shadow fell over the dog, and she cringed. His smile disappeared, replaced with alarm when an overweight man with a sour frown and cruel eyes leaned down and swatted the Goldie on the muzzle.

“Hey!” he shouted, forgetting himself a moment.

Fortunately, a motorcycle with an aftermarket exhaust sped by at that moment, so his shout was muffled by the closed door of his truck and the loud rattle of the engine. His view wasn’t muffled, however, and he could see the man slap his dog again.

He shouldn’t do it. He should just let this go. He had his own dogs to think about, and time was running out.

But then the Goldie lifted its sad eyes to meet his own, and he couldn’t let it go anymore. He watched as the sour-faced man dragged the Goldie into his home, shouting at it the whole way.

He memorized the address and checked the clock on the dash. He would come back in a few hours. He might not be able to do anything for Trotter, but he could rescue one last dog and give her a good home to spend the rest of her days.

It was the least he could do.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dr. Karl Vanheusen lived on eight acres just outside of town. As the agents turned the corner into his driveway, they saw nearly two dozen dogs running loose on the property, surrounded by a high chainlink fence. The dogs were of all shapes, sizes and breeds.

“Starting to think he might be the guy,” Michael said.

Faith didn't say anything, but she suspected the same thing. Michael parked the SUV behind an old but flawlessly maintained Datsun sports car. Faith wondered what it was about old Datsuns that attracted academics. Maybe they just liked having something unique.

Faith knocked on the door. She didn't expect an answer, so she was surprised when a short-ish man of medium build wearing gold wire-rimmed glasses answered a few seconds later.

“Hello?” he said in a slight Dutch accent. “Can I help you?”

“Dr. Karl Vanheusen?” Faith asked.

“Yes, speaking. Who are you?”

“I'm Special Agent Faith Bold, and this is my partner Special Agent Michael Prince. This is our K9 unit, Turk.”

“I see,” Karl replied, “Why are you here?”

“We're investigating the murders of Gerald Conway, Gigi Demetrious and George Merrill,” Faith replied. “We'd like to ask you a few questions.”

Karl's eyes flitted between the three agents for a moment before he replied. “Well, I'm sorry, I don't think I can be of any help to you. I don't recognize these names.”

“Can we come inside?” Michael asked with an easy smile.

Karl took a step back and shook his head. “No. This is not a good time.”

“Why not?” Michael asked, “You have big plans for the day?”

Karl blinked and looked between the two of them again. “Well, I’m sure it’s none of your business how I plan to spend my day. Look, I don’t recognize the names you mentioned, and I’m sorry that they’ve been murdered, but I don’t have any information that will help solve those crimes, so I’m afraid I have to ask you to leave.”

“Doctor,” Faith asked, “Are you familiar with Chlor-Pheromone Six?”

Karl’s face blanched. He stammered a moment and said, “You need to leave. Come back with a warrant. You have no right to be here.”

Faith glanced into the house and saw several vials on the table. “What are those?”

Karl made to close the door, but Michael caught it with his hand. “You have a lot of dogs here,” he said. “Are they all yours?”

“Agents!” Karl cried, trying to sound forceful and only succeeding in sounding frightened. “You need to leave!”

At that moment, Faith heard loud barking to her left. She turned and saw a dozen or so dogs, all of whom were snarling and barking and chewing on the fence in their desperation to get to her. The dogs ranged from small Jack Russells to large Mastiffs. All had laid-back ears and bared teeth.

“They are guard dogs!” Karl protested.

“The Jack Russells and Dachshunds are guard dogs?” Michael asked. “What about the Pekingese?”

Karl swallowed. “You have no right to be here.”

“Does that bottle say Chlor-Pheromone seven?” Faith asked, peering at the bottles on the table. “You’ve been busy, Doctor.”

“As I said,” Karl replied, “Come back with a warrant.”

He tried to close the door, but Michael forced it open again. “I’m going to say we have enough for probable cause,” he said.

“Hey!” Karl said as he backed away, “You can’t—”

“Well, look at that,” Michael interrupted, grabbing one of the bottles on the table. “Chlor-Pheromone *eight*. You really *have* been busy.”

Karl licked his lips and looked nervously around. Faith took in the view and saw several piles of vials, bottles and loose pills and powders along with jugs of different colored liquids. The place looked like a meth lab. Which, in a way, it was.

“Y—you can’t—” Karl tried again, his voice thready.

“I think we’ve established that we can, Doctor,” Faith interrupted. “You’re more than welcome to call a lawyer if you think we’re mistaken. Now, If *I* were you—” she met his eyes “—I would start telling me everything. The truth, the whole truth, nothing but. You know the drill.”

Karl licked his lips again. Then he hardened his face and said, “I did not commit these murders. If you wish to detain me based on what you’ve witnessed, I will go quietly, but I will answer no further questions without the presence of my lawyer.”

“Suit yourself,” Michael said, pulling a pair of handcuffs from his belt. “Faith, you want to call Tom and let him know we have a present for him?”

“You’re wasting your time,” Karl said. “I already told you I didn’t kill them.”

“If I had a nickel,” Michael said. “But tell you what, Karl. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. Let’s say you didn’t kill them. How about you answer mine and my partner’s questions so we can figure out who really did kill them? Sound good?”

“I’m not talking without my lawyer present.”

“Faith, how long on the lawyer?”

“Tom says twenty minutes.”

“Wonderful. We’ll wait. While we wait, do you mind if I ask about your pheromone? It seems pretty cool. I’m sure a lot of people would love to have medicine that will help their dogs remain docile and calm and friendly... all that good stuff. Have you ever talked to anyone about it?”

Karl stared defiantly up at Michael, who lifted his hands placatingly and smiled. “Just trying to make friendly conversation.”

“You’re not my friend,” Karl retorted.

“You’re right, Karl,” Faith said. “We’re not friends. That means we have no reason to do you any favors. I’m sure the DEA will take a keen interest in the illegal pharmaceutical lab you have at your house. Like it or not, you’re done. You’re looking at fifteen years at least, unless you gave the chemical to someone else, in which case you’re looking at twenty-five. You didn’t give the chemical to anyone else, did you?”

Karl remained silent, but there was considerably less defiance in his demeanor than before.

“Well, that’s all right,” Faith said. “You’ll have plenty of time to think of an answer. Considering that you’re what, sixty-two? Sixty-three? You might have the rest of your life.”

“Like my partner said,” Michael added. “We have no reason to do you any favors. However, if you were to tell us something that could help us find the murderer, then we could at least toss you a bone or two as thanks for your help. We might even be able to neglect to mention the lab we found. We can tell the DEA that you just had some leftover drugs on hand and that someone broke into your house and stole it. You might get a bit of a fine for the leftovers, but you won’t be in prison until your grandkids forget about you.”

Karl’s eyes faltered a moment, then hardened. “I will not answer questions without my lawyer.”

Michael shrugged. “Suit yourself. Faith, you want a soda? I’m heading to the vending machines.”

“I’ll go with you,” she said. “Karl, you want a soda while we’re gone? A candy bar? Maybe some chips?”

Karl glared at the two agents and didn't say anything. Faith shrugged, then followed Michael out the door.

"We need him to talk," Michael said. "If he lawyers up, the lawyer's going to shut down any more conversation and whisk him away somewhere to work on a cover story."

"He's behind bars," Faith said, "if he's the guy, then it doesn't matter how long the process takes. He'll be off the streets where he can't hurt anyone else."

"*If* he's the guy?"

Faith met Michael's eyes and saw the curiosity and impatience there. He hid the impatience well, but Faith knew it was there because she felt the same way. In high-pressure cases, there was a natural hope that the killer would be caught soon before he could kill anyone else, and finding out that a suspect wasn't the murderer was disheartening.

Obviously, you couldn't let that cloud your judgment, though. As much as Faith wished she could be certain that Karl was their guy, she didn't know it for sure.

"Turk reacted immediately to the smell of that King Charles. He could tell immediately that Trotter was one of the dogs involved in the murder of George Merrill. He's been around Karl for the past three hours, and he hasn't reacted the same way at all."

"Faith, the guy created pheromones to modify dog behavior. He could be carrying some sort of pheromone that's dulling Turk's senses."

"If Turk's senses were dulled, he'd react the same way we would if our vision became hazy or our hearing weakened."

"Well, maybe he's just making Turk docile. Look, I know you're going to tell me not to try to make a square peg fit into a round hole, but this is a pretty damned square hole, Faith. I think you should stop trying to make a square peg a round peg. This man has plenty of dogs of all shapes and sizes. He has a damned lab in his house. I'll bet my badge he's using it to make more of the pheromone that our killer is using to manage these dogs. We saw over a dozen of the dogs act aggressive in a crazed manner. I've seen guard dogs bark before, but I've

never seen a twelve-pound Pekingese trying to eat through chainlink so it could tear my throat out before. This is our guy.”

“This *looks* like our guy,” Faith agreed. “But I don’t know. I don’t buy that he’s somehow drugging Turk with what? An aerosol? We’d see something on the security feed if that were the case.”

Michael pursed his lips, clearly still unhappy. After a moment, though, he nodded and said, “All right. What do you want to do, then?”

“I don’t think he’s the killer,” Faith repeated, “but I do think he’s in deep shit, and he knows it. He didn’t seem afraid when we mentioned the murders, but when we saw his drugs, he panicked, and just now when I mentioned the DEA, he froze and turned white. I don’t think he killed anyone, but I think he sold our killer the drugs he used to control the dogs.”

“And you think he’s afraid of being looped in as an accessory.”

“I think he’s afraid because he knows exactly who the killer is, and he doesn’t want to admit to himself or to us that he gave the killer his weapon.”

“So what do you want to do?” Michael repeated.

“I want to talk to him,” Faith said.

Michael sighed. “Faith, we’ve been talking to him. He’s not going to tell us anything.”

“Just let me try,” Faith said, “please.”

Michael sighed and said, “All right.”

They walked back to the interrogation room. Karl was staring at Turk, who watched him with a bored expression. Faith sat next to Turk while Michael stood behind them, arms crossed.

“Karl, my K9 unit is very well-trained. He used to be an explosives dog in Iraq.”

Karl nodded but said nothing.

“He’s actually caught serial killers before because of smell.”

Karl didn’t react.

“So the fact that he’s been in the same room with you for hours and hasn’t acted suspicious around you tells me that you might not be our guy after all.”

Karl’s gaze snapped to Faith. Faith saw first hope, then suspicion on his face. “Why are you keeping me here, then?”

“Because I think you know who the killer is. I think that someone else has been to your house looking for the pheromone. I think you gave him some or sold him some, and now you’re afraid of the world falling down around you.

“Look, I don’t blame you. The reality is that you’re in a lot of trouble right now. But if you help us, we can make things easier. The DEA doesn’t need to know about the lab. You can deny that you sold anyone anything. You can claim that they broke in and stole from you. You might get some time, but only a few years at most. More likely just a big fine like my partner said.”

“You’ll do all of that?” Karl asked warily.

“We’ll do what we can,” Faith replied.

Karl clammed up again, and Michael took over. “Karl, you messed around with things you should have left alone. You didn’t like when people stopped paying attention to you. You saw your chance to be famous, and when that fame disappeared, you got angry and, let’s be honest, obsessive. You haven’t worked in close to seven years. You’ve been spending all of your time at your home lab trying to perfect a pheromone that no one wants anymore. And somehow, some way, a killer got his hands on your pheromone and used it to murder three people.”

“That we know of so far,” Faith amended.

Michael nodded. “So you’re screwed. I’m not going to tell you that you’re going to walk out of here today. You won’t. But I *will* tell you that if you make it harder for us to find the person who did kill these people, we’re going to make sure this hurts. We’re going to make sure you get accessory for

every single person killed, every single dog stolen, every single gram of pheromone that your lab synthesized. You'll be in jail for the rest of your life. We'll make sure of it. So you're between a rock and a hard place, but the rock is a lot smaller than the hard place. A few years for possession and you're back on your feet."

"With what?" Karl said dejectedly. "I will never have a career again."

"You already don't have a career," Faith pointed out. "But you can spend the rest of your life in your own home, or you can spend the rest of it sharing a cell with a violent murderer. What's it gonna be?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He always took three vials with him. One was a sedative used to knock out the person to be punished. The second was the pheromone. This he would insert into an aerosol can and mist over the victim when he was ready for the dogs. The third was a failsafe, two hundred milligrams of potassium cyanide. He could use it to kill the target if something went wrong. Or, if something went really wrong, he could use it on himself.

His vials, along with the refillable aerosol can for later, rested in a foam-lined container he built himself using stolen material from his old office. The container, a small briefcase, sat on the passenger seat of his pickup as he drove back to the victim's house. His dogs waited at home. He would pick them up later. It was better to spend as little time as possible with the dogs in the pickup. It attracted suspicion.

He glanced over at the briefcase, and the memories of his old job resurfaced again. He worked for a Doctor Karl Vanheusen, a brilliant man, one whose ideas could have revolutionized veterinary medicine if he hadn't been censored by ignoramuses too stupid to see the value in his work.

He was a tech for Doctor Vanheusen and heard much of the doctor's musings on his pheromones. He couldn't wait for the FDA to approve the drug for use with pets, but of course, things went a different way. He assumed Doctor Vanheusen would fight, but he didn't. He hung his head and started destroying the pheromone just like ordered.

Well, he couldn't allow that. He knew there was value in the doctor's work. He didn't know what that value was at the time, but he knew he couldn't allow the doctor's magnum opus to be discarded like that.

So, he stole a few vials and downloaded the research that detailed how to synthesize the pheromone. That was the hard part. A home chemistry set of the kind parents bought precocious children was all he needed to ensure a steady

supply of the pheromone, which required very little in the way of exotic raw materials to synthesize. The raw materials he did need, he accumulated over the next year at his following job at the animal clinic.

His wistful smile faded when he thought of the clinic. He enjoyed working with the animals there, but the people—staff and client—were not so enjoyable. Dr. Vanheusen was always kind to his animals, but some of these people... he had never seen animal abuse before then.

The worst was Honey.

His fingers tightened reflexively on the steering wheel. He took a big breath, held it and released it slowly, then repeated until his arms relaxed.

Honey was his first. She was a fourteen-year-old Red Tick Hound whose owner decided that since she was too old to work, she must be put down.

The poor dog, of course, had no idea that the reason her master brought her to the vet was to have her killed. She was old and slow and nearly blind, but she was still sharp-minded and strong enough to have a few more good years left.

The vet, Doctor Parvati, the only vet at that clinic who cared about the animals more than about money, saw the same thing and refused to put the animal down. The owner, a fat, ugly, mean-tempered man named Gus Friese, threw a fit, yelling and screaming that it was his dog, and he could do whatever he pleased with her.

Doctor Parvati stood her ground, but she wasn't entirely blameless because she let him leave with Honey. He begged and pleaded to be allowed to take Honey home himself, but Doctor Parvati wouldn't do that. She insisted that it was against the law, and they had done everything they could for her.

Well, they hadn't. They hadn't protected her. They had sent Friese home with his poor old dog, and both of them had blood on their hands.

He had tried, though. He got Friese's address from the receptionist and headed to his place immediately after work,

intending to buy Honey and take her home. He would pay whatever Mr. Friese asked, just would he please let him give Honey a good home for her final years.

He was too late.

He got to the house and saw Gus in his backyard digging a hole. Honey's body lay next to him, her head caved in by the same shovel that now dug her grave.

His fingers tightened again, and he did a few more breathing exercises to calm himself. He turned down the street where the new criminal lived and breathed slowly, willing himself to be calm.

He had been calm the first time, too. After the initial shock of seeing Honey's mutilated, lifeless body, he felt that calm settle over him.

He was a small man, not strong, and not violent. He couldn't hope to overpower even an old and fat man like Friese. He abhorred guns, and he was of no use with a knife.

But he had dogs. He had rescued a few dogs already, and with the help of Dr. Vanheusen's pheromones, he could use the dogs to do what he couldn't do. They could avenge their fallen sister.

It took him three weeks to figure out a way to reverse the effects of the pheromone, or rather to create the anti-pheromone to Vanheusen's pheromone. He had always been smart. He was quiet and shy around others. That had always been his downfall, but that was all right. He didn't need to be a doctor or a scientist. He realized now that he could do good in the world in his own way.

He found Gus Friese walking alone in the park behind his house. He was terrified that he would make a mistake, but things went smoothly. He sneaked up behind him, injected him with barbiturates to make him fall asleep, then took him out to the desert. He smiled as he recalled the recognition in Gus Friese's eyes just before his dogs tore him to pieces.

That was the first time in his life he felt he had done anything that mattered. He had given justice to the memory of

a poor old dog who only wanted to be loved. He had avenged an animal that had no one to defend it.

And he didn't stop there. Over the past five years, he had served justice to over twenty different dogs whose owners abused and neglected them. He had rescued the dogs and given them a good life and a purpose—to be his instrument to avenge and to rescue their brothers and sisters from cruelty.

He turned down the next street, a cul-de-sac, and drove to the end, parking along the bulbous tip of the street. He thought idly that the design was oddly phallic. Then again, he shouldn't be surprised. Humanity was in love with itself and created homages to their perceived greatness in everything.

He walked up the steps to the new target's house. The sedative he now used was far more sophisticated than the barbiturates he used when he started. It would leave the victim conscious but extremely suggestible for the first five minutes before putting them to sleep. That would allow him to walk his victim to the truck without alerting suspicion from the neighbors.

He knocked on the door, and when there was no answer, he knocked again. The door opened, and the sour-faced man from earlier stepped forward. "What—"

"Careful, man!" he interrupted, putting his hand out as though to stop his victim from stumbling. The victim didn't see the needle in his hand, and by the time he thought to wonder what that prick in his neck was, his conscious mind had taken a back seat.

"What—?" he repeated, his words slurring.

"Careful, buddy," he repeated with a chuckle. "Let's get out of here and get some drinks."

"Drinks?"

"Yeah, man, I'm taking you to that new bar on seventh street."

"Okay."

He helped the man into the truck and looked around to make sure he hadn't been seen. There were lights on in a few

windows, but the curtains were drawn and no shadows were visible.

That was the lovely thing about Goldwood. People minded their own business.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Faith, relax. It’s not the end of the world. We’ve been in this situation before.”

“Really? Where, through our own incompetence, we’ve endangered lives?”

“Yes,” Michael replied without hesitation. “We’ve fucked up before. A lot, actually, and everything’s worked out. It’s like you always say, everything in a case goes wrong until something goes right.”

“When have I ever said that?”

“Well, that’s not exactly what you say, but it’s close enough. You get the point.”

Faith sighed irritably. “That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“Okay,” Michael said, a little more sternly. “How about this then? Fuck your feelings. We have a job to do right now, and I need you sharp and in the moment, not moping about an oversight that we’ve now corrected. After we catch this guy, you can go feel sorry for yourself. Sound good?”

Faith’s lips thinned, but Michael was right. It wasn’t good for her to dwell on their mistake right now. “Sounds good.”

“Wonderful. In that case, I won’t waste any more of our time telling you that you’re an idiot for being hard on yourself until after we catch the guy.”

Faith couldn’t quite suppress a smirk. “Sounds good.”

Their new suspect wasn’t someone who purchased the pheromone from Doctor Vanheusen but someone who stole it. They were so focused on Doctor Vanheusen’s activities after his sanctioned research ended that they completely missed the possibility of someone else from the study being the killer. When Doctor Vanheusen admitted to missing several vials of Chlor-Pheromone Six when he shut down the lab at Arizona State, Faith knew immediately the angle they had missed.

“Did anyone besides you have access to the drug cabinet?” she had asked.

“Yes,” Karl had, of course, replied. “His name was Jay Chung.”

Jay Chung, evidently, was Karl’s lab assistant. A quiet, introverted man with a baby face and a soft voice who seemed intent—in Karl’s words—on making as little of an impression on people as possible. Despite this, Karl said, he had a brilliant mind, and often assisted not only with the menial labor of cleaning and preparing equipment but also with devising tests that would demonstrate whether the pheromone worked as intended or not.

“Why didn’t you report the drugs missing?” Michael asked. “You would be completely off the hook for that. They would know right away who took the drugs.”

“Except that you took some yourself, and you didn’t want them looking through your handbag either, did you?” Faith pointed out.

Karl hung his head and said nothing.

Tom had tracked down Jay Chung to an address in the southwestern portion of town, a ten-minute drive from the station. Now, the three federal agents were following four sheriff’s department cruisers and two command vehicles to the address, sirens blazing.

“Almost there, Faith,” Michael reassured her. “Just a few more minutes, and then we’ll get this asshole.”

Faith had a feeling it wouldn’t be that easy.

She was right. They arrived to find the house empty. Completely empty. When there was no knock at the door, Tom ordered the officers to break in. They were far less careful than Faith was breaking into Foster Chase’s house, preferring a battering ram to a jeweler’s screwdriver and a bobby pin.

The house told Faith everything she needed to know. There were no fewer than twenty-three dog bowls lined up next to twenty-three different automatic water dispensers. There were an equal number of dog beds, and the fence outside was nearly ten feet high. One portion of the fence was dug out and a

length of chicken wire pulled out of the hole. That was probably where the spaniel had escaped.

The house was a mess, dog food spilled everywhere and drawers and cabinets left open. The mess seemed recent, no caked-on dirt, no musty smell. Chung clearly kept his house clean and had simply grabbed essentials and left.

He was fleeing.

She sighed heavily. “All right. He’s clearly not here. He would need a vehicle big enough to transport all of these dogs—a large van or RV or a trailer. See if you can put checkpoints up along the roads leading out of town.”

Tom shook his head. “They won’t let us shut the town down just to look through every RV and tractor-trailer that passes through Goldwood.”

“Well, figure out what they *will* do, Tom!” Faith snapped. “There’s a killer on the run.”

Tom tensed at her tone, but nodded and made the call. Faith sighed and ran her hands through her hair. “We’ll stay here for now,” she said, “in case he comes back. Let’s move the vehicles and shut the lights off so if he...”

Her voice trailed off when she saw a scrap of paper on the floor near the bathroom door. She frowned and picked it up. In a scrawl that would have made every doctor in America proud, she could just decipher, *Arthur Warhol, 245 Blanket Drive*.

He wasn’t fleeing. Not yet. He was hunting. One last kill, and then he would leave.

“Tom!” she called. “Michael!”

The two of them hurried to her side. She showed them the note, and their eyes widened in realization. Tom immediately called the officers and relayed the new address.

They left Jay’s house and rushed to 245 Blanket Drive. That was another ten-minute drive, but they made it in six, using sirens and loudspeakers to clear the road. Faith did some quick mental calculations in her head. If he had all of his dogs, he had to be in a large vehicle, and that meant a slow vehicle. Not to mention the fact that such a vehicle would be

conspicuous. The neighbors would have noticed if he parked a large van or truck on a cul-de-sac. If the killer wasn't there when they arrived, they could ask the neighbors if they'd seen anything and hopefully get the exact vehicle and put out an APB.

The killer wasn't there, and neither was Arthur Warhol. What was there was a rusted wire crate with a pile of dog feces in one corner, dog urine in another and a few moldy kibbles in another.

Well, there was the motive. Jay Chung had found himself another abusive owner.

She called Tom and Michael over again. "Start asking the neighbors if they saw anything. He would have to be in something big with all of those dogs. It would have been noticeable."

Tom nodded and split his officers up into groups of two. Faith and Michael helped, working their way outward from Arthur's next-door neighbor.

No one saw anything. No vans, no RVs, no big trucks. It didn't make sense. Jay couldn't have transported two dozen dogs in anything smaller than a full-sized heavy-duty van. He probably had something bigger since he cared so much about the dogs. There was no way no one noticed something that big.

Unless he grabbed Arthur first, then grabbed the dogs. She took a deep breath and let it out rapidly through her nose.

"What is it?" Michael asked.

"He grabbed Arthur first," she said. "Then he grabbed the dogs. That's why no one noticed the vehicle. He didn't bring it here."

"Dammit!" Michael swore. "All right, any idea on a timeline?"

Faith looked out at the darkening sky. "He kills his victims at night in open spaces where his dogs have room to work, and the victim has room to try to flee."

"Yeah, but he has two dozen dogs this time," Michael said, "not a half-dozen. He's going to need a lot more room."

“He might not use all of his dogs,” Faith reasoned, “but you’re right, we should assume he’s not going to be within city limits.”

“After the day we’ve had, I don’t think we should assume shit,” Michael said. “This guy’s been one step ahead of us all day. We can’t risk going somewhere else and missing him again.”

Faith thought it over. “You’re right. We need to split up. We need to make a list of places where he might take his victim and send teams to each place. We tell them to call us immediately if they find him. Then we all converge and take him out.”

Michael sighed. “Well, I hate it, but it’s the only choice left to us.”

They called Tom and gave him the new info. “Well,” Tom said, “In town, the only places that fit the bill are the sports complex and the city park. Out of town is desert for sixty miles going west and eight miles going east. I don’t even know how far north and south.”

“Let’s send a pair of officers to each of the in-town places,” Faith said, “and a team to the nature park as well. Lightning doesn’t usually strike the same place twice, so I don’t think we’ll find him there, but it doesn’t hurt to cover all of our bases. The rest of us split up into pairs and started canvassing the ground outside of town. How soon can other agencies get to us?”

“This is the definition of the middle of nowhere, Special Agent,” Tom said, “We’re it until you hit Flagstaff.”

Faith sighed. “I don’t suppose you have helicopters?”

He shook his head. “Wasted the whole budget on the new cruisers.”

She sighed again. “Well, then we’ll do the best we can with what we have.”

Faith allowed her mind to wander as she drove to her assigned spot on the grid—a shallow valley in between two low ridges five miles past town. She didn't fixate on any one thought. If anything important came to mind, she would latch onto it.

In the seat next to her, Turk stared intently out the window, showing the calm he always did before a chase. She knew that just beneath that calm was a power and strength that few humans could match, but this human wasn't alone. With him were two dozen dogs, many of whom were at least as big and strong as Turk. She would give Turk even odds against one or even two or three dogs, but two dozen?

They needed to be careful. They needed to find the killer and use discipline to wait for the cavalry to arrive instead of going off like cowboys and getting themselves hurt or killed. She knew from experience that this was not idle speculation. So did Turk.

But she also knew that if she saw an innocent person about to be murdered, she wouldn't hesitate, and neither would Turk. That was the blessing and the curse of their profession.

Or maybe it was just her own blessing and curse. Michael certainly seemed to think so. He protested loudly and persistently that it was a mistake for her to go off alone with Turk.

“We're partners, Faith. I should be with you.”

“Michael, we don't have time to stand on ceremony right now. Arthur Warhol is hours or possibly minutes from death, and we don't know where Chung has taken him. We need to find him ASAP. You have my word that I'll wait for backup if Turk and I find him.”

Michael looked sadly at Faith and said, “We both know you'll break your word if you feel you need to.”

His words had cut deeply, but she had to admit that he was right. She had broken her word several times in the past two years, and she didn't need therapy to tell her that was due to the trauma she had suffered at the Donkey Killer's hands or

that her dishonesty was responsible for the strain on her relationships far more than her paranoia was.

She hadn't tried to deny that. "I'll give you a call if we find him," was all she said.

Michael was nearby, the next grid location over, a scrub plain close enough to the road that it was feasible he could park whatever vehicle he had near the plain. He would be at her location in fifteen minutes if she found Chung.

That wouldn't be enough time to stop her if she felt a need to intervene. She would try to find cover so she could hold Chung off for as long as possible without needing to step in, but that might not save Warhol.

She took a breath and nudged her mind in a different direction. She thought she knew what the chain of events was. Chung had taken Warhol in a smaller vehicle, then used that smaller vehicle to transport the dogs a few at a time to wherever he kept the larger vehicle and fled town from there. She wasn't sure if he had thought of that all at once or pieced it together as he went along, but she would bet that's what happened. If they had more time, she would have Tom look up Chung and see if he owned any other property besides his house, but right now, she needed all hands on deck looking for Chung.

There were just too many places to look. Goldwood wasn't a small town, but it was the only town for at least an hour in every direction. It was almost comedic how perfect the area was for committing murder.

So where would Chung go? In a worst-case scenario, he was smart enough to realize that he could go anywhere and would simply drive until he found the first convenient spot. That would make things incredibly difficult for the investigators, but not impossible. They had thirteen teams of people looking for him, and they could cover quite a bit of ground. Still, the farther out from town they went, the more ground they had to cover, and without helicopters, it was like finding a needle in a haystack.

So where would he go in a not worst-case scenario? Probably to one of the areas Tom mentioned—the park, the

sports complex or the nature park just outside of town. The nature park would be bad. They had gambled that he wouldn't go there and sent only one team to cover forty-four thousand acres.

The other two places would be a piece of cake. They could have uniforms on the scene in five minutes and make it impossible for him to escape.

Faith didn't think he would go anywhere he'd been before, though. He seemed to pick a new location for each victim. The question was, would he pick randomly this time or deliberately as he had before? If he did pick deliberately, where would he go?

She couldn't think of an answer, so she let her mind drift elsewhere as she parked the cruiser and got out of the car with Turk. She looked around and saw a small cluster of boulders on the top of one of the ridges. She would head there and see if he was there.

This killing was emotional to him, more so than usual. He had been forced from his home. He had twenty-three dogs and was now forced to make a life elsewhere, and probably a quiet one without risking getting caught murdering people again.

He would make this one count. He would use all of his dogs, she was sure of it. He would use all of his dogs, and there would be nothing left of Andy Warhol when they were finished. Then he would leave. He may even choose to leave his dogs behind. She doubted that, though. They meant something to him. He loved them, or at least felt for them as close to love as he could feel.

Doctor Vanheusen had described him as a quiet and soft-spoken person, very shy but very helpful and very studious. He mentioned that Chung seemed to idolize him and was crushed when he learned Vanheusen's research was being shut down. In his twisted mind, Faith was sure that he was doing this partly as an homage to Vanheusen.

She frowned. An homage to Vanheusen. Why was that thought sticking in her head? She played it around, knowing that if she was fixating on it, there was a very good reason for it.

Then it hit her.

She gasped and stiffened. Turk snapped his head to her, then looked around, trying to find the threat.

“We’re in the wrong place, Turk,” she said.

She turned and sprinted back to the cruiser, Turk right on her heels.

Chung idolized Vanheusen, saw him as an inspiration. Vanheusen was in jail and would likely not be back home for years, if at all. The property was large, more than enough room for two dozen dogs to chase down and kill Arthur Warhol. Vanheusen’s dogs had all been taken by animal control, and the DEA had confiscated all of the chemicals. The place was cordoned off, but there was no reason for anyone to suspect that someone might come back, so there was no surveillance, and it was outside of town and right next to a minor road that led south to a different interstate than the one that ran through Goldwood.

It was perfect.

She called Michael as soon as she was inside the cruiser. “Michael, he’s at Vanheusen’s house.”

“What? Are you sure?”

She quickly explained her reasoning. “That’s why we can’t find any sign of him. We’ve been assuming he’ll look for a place out in the open, but I think he’s doing this as an homage to Vanheusen.”

“I think he’s just capitalizing on an opportunity,” Michael replied, “but either way’s fine with me. Do you want me to call Tom and have him send everyone over there?”

Faith thought a moment. “No, not everyone. Just a half-dozen officers. That should be enough to handle them.”

“You sure about that? That’s a lot of dogs.”

“Yes, I’m sure. We might have to shoot to kill, but I think we can find a way out before it comes to that.”

“I hope you’re right, Faith.”

“Me too.”

She hung up and gunned the engine. Next to her, Turk stared intently out the window once more.

“What do you say, Turk? Wanna go catch a bad guy?”

Turk barked agreement, and Faith smiled and switched the cruiser’s lights on.

CHAPTER TWENTY

She saw the big rig two miles away. She swore under her breath and called Michael. “How long on backup?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“What? Why?”

“Small town, and everyone’s looking for Chung.”

Faith sighed. “Well, send them ASAP. Chung’s definitely here. I just saw his truck.”

“Yeah? All right. See if you can figure out exactly where he is. Then *wait for us*. Do you understand?”

Faith’s eyes flickered to the left, and she was glad he wasn’t there to see that. “I understand.”

“Good. Call me when you find out exactly where he is.”

“Will do. See you soon.”

She parked the cruiser behind the rig and left the lights on. Stealth was the wrong strategy now. She needed Chung to know they were there. She needed Warhol to know they were there and put up a fight before Chung used the pheromone.

What she really needed was to go back to two hours ago and head straight here instead of detouring at Chung’s and Warhol’s houses.

Well, there would be time to self-incriminate later. Right now, she had a victim to rescue.

She rushed from the cruiser, Turk following. “Go find them, Turk,” she said. “Find them, but *stay back*.”

Turk dipped his head in acknowledgment, then trotted ahead of her. She followed him as closely as he could while he worked his way around the fence. After a few minutes, he barked and worked his way through a cut open portion of the fence. Faith followed, and after a minute with his nose to the ground, he barked again and sprinted ahead.

She followed him while he led her to the crest of a small hill on Vanheusen's property. As she drew closer, she could hear dogs. They didn't sound angry yet. That could either mean they had already killed Warhol or that they hadn't yet.

She drew her service weapon and pulled the slide back, then scaled the hill. Ten feet from the top, she dropped prone and army-crawled up to the crest.

As if on cue, that's when she could just make out a human voice crying, "Please!"

She looked down and saw the dogs. They milled around a few feet behind a slightly built man holding an aerosol can. Chung. Ten feet in front of Chung was the quivering form of Arthur Warhol.

She pulled her radio and called Michael. "Michael, I've found him," she said softly. "He's in a shallow depression on the south side of the property. He has the victim and the dogs, and he's preparing to kill the victim."

Michael swore. "We're still ten minutes away."

"I need that sooner, Michael. We're seconds away from go here."

"I don't know what to tell you," Michael said, "We're still thirteen miles out and five of those minutes are in traffic. Listen, Faith. If it comes to it, save *yourself*. Do you understand?"

Faith didn't answer.

"Faith?"

"Just get here as soon as you can, Michael," she said.

She hung up and listened intently to the two men below.

"I don't know what I did!" Arthur was begging. "Please! I don't know what I did!"

Chung looked at him with a mixture of amazement and disgust. "You know, the sad thing, Arthur, is that I believe you. You really are so utterly backward that you lack the capacity even to understand that you've done anything wrong."

“Please,” Arthur blubbered. “Just let me go. Teach me what I did wrong. I’ll do better next time.”

“No, you won’t,” Chung said bitterly. “No one does better next time. That’s why you don’t get a next time.”

“No!” Arthur shouted. “No, please! Please don’t!”

Chung lifted the aerosol can and aimed it at Warhol.

“Dammit,” Faith swore under her breath. She leaped to her feet and aimed her weapon at Chung. “Drop the can!” she shouted.

Chung spun toward her, stunned, the can still outraised.

“Drop the can right now, or I *will* shoot you!” she called.

He blinked, still holding the can. “What is this?”

“I’m Special Agent Faith Bold, FBI. You’re Jay Chung, and you’re under arrest for the murders of Gerald Conway, Gigi Demetrious, and George Merrill along with the attempted murder and assault of Arthur Warhol. There will be a lot of other charges by the time we’re done with you, but those are the big ones.”

Faith wanted him to keep talking, so when he didn’t reply after a moment, she said, “Just put the can down, Chung, and we can talk. I know you’re upset that Mr. Warhol abused his dog.”

“Hey!” Warhol protested, “I didn’t—“

Faith spun toward him with a glare. His jaw snapped shut, and Faith continued. “This is no reason to go to jail, Jay. Just put the can away, and we’ll talk.”

She inched closer as she spoke, Turk standing in between her and Chung’s dogs, which watched from a few yards away. They were all well-trained, sitting still in spite of the strange dog and the woman holding a gun to their owner’s forehead.

Jay laughed. It was a soft, melodic sound, almost feminine. His voice was equally soft and soothing. It was no wonder he was so popular with dogs.

His words were somewhat less soothing than his tone. “Don’t play me for a fool, Special Agent. We both know I’m

done for if the sheriff's find me.”

“When the sheriff's find you,” Faith corrected. “They're here any minute now, Jay. Even if you killed me, Warhol and my dog, you still wouldn't have enough time to get away. Even if you left your dogs behind—”

“I will *never* abandon my babies!” he shouted.

“All right,” she said, lifting a hand to placate him. “I'm only saying that there's no way for you to get out of this, but if you come quietly now and cooperate, we can make things easier on you.”

“What's an easy life sentence, Special Agent?” he replied sarcastically.

“There's a big difference between medium security and maximum security, Jay. I don't mean to be judgmental, but types like you don't do well in maximum security. Believe me, you want the easiest time of it you can get.”

Jay chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I don't think so, Special Agent, but nice try.”

Faith lifted her weapon and pointed it at Jay. “You can go right now if you're in that much of a hurry,” she said calmly.

Jay smiled at her. “We'll see.”

His smile disappeared in a snarl as he lifted the aerosol can and sprayed.

At Faith. Faith cursed and tried to sidestep, but the spray hit her before she could get out of the way. She looked up to see Warhol running toward the hole in the fence, already sixty yards away from Chung and the dogs.

He didn't need to run. The dogs didn't care about him anymore. It was doubtful they even remembered he existed.

She heard a chorus of growls and turned to see Chung's dogs glaring at her, teeth bared. Chung grinned and stepped out of the way. “Better luck next time, Special Agent.”

Faith swung toward him, aiming her weapon, when she heard another, much closer growl. She realized what it was, and her heart sank even before she looked down at Turk.

He glared at her, his eyes glazed over but at the same time in perfect focus. His lips pulled back in a snarl, revealing his perfectly white, sharp teeth. The absurd thought came to her head that David would be proud of her for taking such good care of Turk's teeth.

If she survived to tell David.

"Turk," Faith said. "It's me. Snap out of it. You're stronger than this."

Turk closed his mouth and blinked. He cocked his head and stared at Faith, then tentatively bared his teeth again.

"Turk, please."

The hair on her left ear prickled. She spun to that side just in time to see the dogs rushing her. They moved silently, their growls silencing as they pounced.

She turned and sprinted back up the hill. The hillside was rocky, which made things difficult for the dogs, so she was able to keep her distance as she climbed the ridge. She looked back behind her at the top and saw Turk at the head of the pack, still looking curiously at her even as he joined in the pursuit.

There was no curiosity in the gazes of the other dogs. Their eyes blazed and their lips pulled back over their teeth as they began to growl and bark again.

"Turk, snap out of it!" Faith shouted, backpedaling. "Turk, wake up, dammit!"

In the distance, she could hear Chung laughing. Her blood boiled. He had come after her dog. He was using Turk against her.

"You think you're a hero, Chung?" she called out. "You're no hero. You're not rescuing these dogs. You're using them. You're nothing more than a cowardly little man hiding in safety because you don't have the guts to handle your problems yourself."

"A for effort, Special Agent!" Chung called out cheerily.

A Rottweiler leaped over the last rock and stood in front of Faith. Two Dobermans leaped to the other side and boxed her

in.

“Dammit, Turk!” Faith called before sprinting away again. This time, she couldn’t outrun the dogs, so she had to keep an eye to either side and avoid the snaps they launched at her ankles. She dodged left and right, crying out once when the Rottweiler tore through the fabric of her pants, narrowly missing her Achilles tendon.

She looked ahead and saw the hole in the fence. She sprinted toward it, but before she reached it, one of the dogs leaped in front of her.

Not one of the dogs. Turk. Turk, the most well-trained of all these dogs, had used her training to cut off her escape and herd her away from safety.

She sprinted toward him, praying that he wouldn’t be so far overcome that he would attack her.

Her prayers were in vain. In a blur of motion, he leapt at her. She knew from their training that he was going for her throat, so she brought her left arm up to protect herself. His jaws snapped shut around her wrist and bit down hard.

She cried out in pain and fear as the rest of the pack converged on her. She fired twice into the air and the pack stopped, shocked by the noise.

Turk, however, had lived around guns his entire life. He didn’t so much as flinch. He released Faith’s arms and jumped easily away from her grasp. He continued to look at her as though he was confused, and she supposed that was the reason he was still alive. He had attacked her but wasn’t finishing the job.

“Turk, it’s me,” she said, getting slowly to her feet, firing once more into the air when the dogs started closing again. “It’s Faith. It’s Mama. Please come back to me.”

Turk took a step closer, teeth bared. The other dogs followed, and when a shot into the air failed to disperse them again, she fired a round into the ground in front of them. They hesitated, but after a few more seconds started closing again.

Turk flattened his ears and approached sinuously, a wolf hunting his prey. She backed away warily, but a few seconds

later, her shoes hit the chainlink fence. The dogs quickly fanned out to keep her from escaping and started closing again.

Turk opened his mouth, tongue lolling, panting with anticipation of the kill. She lifted her weapon and fired into the ground again, but the dogs ignored it.

“Dammit, Turk, don’t make me shoot you!” she said, pointing her trembling handgun at his muzzle.

He didn’t slow, and she realized that this was where she would die. She couldn’t bring herself to shoot him. He was her dog. He was her closest friend. If the Copycat Killer knew about Turk, he would never have bothered with Gordon or Michael or even David. He was the reason she was alive, the reason she hadn’t given up. She couldn’t kill him, not even to save her own life.

“I’m sorry, boy,” she whispered, tears streaming down her face. “Mommy tried.”

She lowered her handgun and prepared for the end. Then she remembered David’s advice about aggressive dogs. Calm self-assurance. Act like you’re unworried and in control.

She couldn’t imagine calm self-assurance would help her in this case, but as long as she was going to die anyway, she might as well try it. She stood tall and squared her shoulders, adopting the businesslike expression she wore on a case. She looked at Turk and in the tone of command she used when on the job with him, she said, “Turk, protect.”

Turk crouched, ready to leap. Then he stopped. He blinked and straightened, cocking his head in confusion again.

The other dogs, predictably, couldn’t care less about her tone. They rushed her, closing the distance with surprising speed.

“Turk, protect!” she commanded again.

Too late. A Doberman leapt at her, mouth open wide, forelimbs extended.

She brought her handgun around, but she knew she wouldn’t make it in time. She steeled herself for the blow, but

it never came. Instead, Turk launched himself into the Doberman's shoulder, much the way he did with Misty at the junkyard. The Doberman went sprawling, and Turk turned around, teeth bared, ears flat and snarling, his back to Faith and his fangs toward whoever approached.

The dogs were taken aback by this a moment, and Turk was able to easily fend off the occasional lunges made by one or two animals. After a moment, though, the pack realized that there were only two enemies and began to converge again, tightening the noose.

Turk leaped right and left, intercepting every dog that came too close to Faith, moving with a grace and power that far outstripped the other dogs.

But not to the tune of twenty-three to two. She had bought them a few extra minutes, but time was running out.

The dogs rushed them at once. She lifted her handgun and shouted.

And then a sheriff's department cruiser and three animal control vans came flying over the hill, skidding to a stop in front of the hole in the fence. A dozen officers came pouring from the vans and sprinted toward the dogs. The pack split, half the dogs going to deal with the new threat, the other half resuming the attack on Turk and Faith.

Faith watched as the animal control officers sprayed something at the dogs that brought them to the ground, yelping and rubbing their eyes in the dirt. A few more pack members left to assist their comrades, but there were still five who remained with Turk and Faith.

They prepared to leap, and Michael jumped in front of Faith and Turk and sprayed all five of the other dogs with a bottle. Faith caught a hint of the acrid smell and guessed that was why the dogs immediately dropped to the floor and rolled around, yelping.

Michael looked at Turk, who wagged his tail and licked his hand in gratitude. Michael turned to Faith and said, "You owe me."

She grinned and said, "You owe me for being right again."

“What part of wait for us don’t you understand?” he asked, frowning. “You could have gotten killed.”

“Would you have watched a victim die?”

He sighed deeply and didn’t respond. He did chuckle, though, and she saw a smile when he looked away and waved at Tom.

The Deputy Sheriff was dragging a very distraught Jay Chung from a stand of trees. Jay was whining and blubbering, repeating over and over, “My dogs! What about my dogs?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Faith caught movement and turned to see Arthur Warhol a few hundred feet away being tended to by a few other deputies. She turned back to Jay, who pouted and whined about his dogs, not even glancing Faith’s way as Tom led him to the waiting cruiser.

“You all right?” Michael asked Faith.

“Sure,” she said. “Right as rain.”

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

“You sure about this, Faith?”

Faith nodded. “I’m sure. Vanheusen might be a mad scientist, but he’s a well-meaning mad scientist. He gave you the neutralizing agent, didn’t he?”

David smiled wryly. “I guess you could say that.”

The “neutralizing agent” turned out to be white wine vinegar. Pheromones were essentially scent packets. Once the scent wore off, the pheromones no longer worked. Vinegar, as it turned out, was a potent enough smell to override every other scent.

“Besides, the dogs need a place to go, and I don’t want to put them into a shelter. I don’t... I don’t really want them to go back to their original owners either.”

At Faith’s recommendation, the judge had agreed to overlook the illegal lab out of gratitude for his assistance in apprehending the Dogwalker, the name the press had given to Jay.

As the flight attendant went through the safety presentation, Michael replied, “I suppose Vanheusen is all right. He’s a bit of a spazz, but that’s chemists for you. He’ll give the dogs a good home.”

“I think so,” she agreed.

“So what’s next for you when you get back home?” he asked.

Faith weighed whether or not to tell Michael the truth. After a moment, she simply said, “I plan on taking a few days to relax before the Boss gives me another headache to deal with.”

Michael chuckled. “Good luck with that. The Boss can smell happiness from a mile away and destroy it from two miles. I swear he was born to be a pain in our ass.”

Faith smiled through the stab of guilt in her chest. She had just lied to Michael for the second time in as many days. She hated that.

Ellie was walking back to her sister's place from a coffee shop. She looked preoccupied, her cherubic face furrowed with lines as she contemplated the stresses of her life. She didn't notice Faith calling her until the agent stepped in front of her.

She shrieked, jumping backwards. She stared at Faith in shock, one hand on her chest. "Faith?"

"Hi, Ellie," Faith replied. "Can we talk?"

Ellie blinked and recoiled slightly. "Faith, what are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you," she said. "Can I? You can pick the place."

Ellie recoiled even further and said, "And if I say no?"

Faith met her eyes and said nothing. Ellie pales slightly and sighed. "Fine. My sister won't be home for a couple of hours. We'll talk at the house." She looked around. "Where's your dog?"

"Turk's at home," Faith said. "It's just you and me."

Ellie cast her a wary glance, which Faith returned with a warm smile. Ellie returned a brief smile of her own, then led Faith down the street. Faith didn't tell Ellie that she already knew exactly where Ellie was staying.

As soon as they were inside the house, Ellie crossed her arms and said, "Do I get to know why this couldn't wait until I came home? You'll have to forgive me, Faith, but it seems a little suspicious that we don't talk for months and then you follow me to Oklahoma City. I know you don't like me, but we could have had an adult conversation about that instead of—" she gestured around, "—whatever this is."

“This is an adult conversation,” Faith said calmly. “You’re going to tell me what’s really going on between you and Michael.”

Ellie laughed, a single, snorting scoff. She rolled her eyes and threw her arms up in exasperation. “Of course,” she said. “That makes sense.”

She looked at Faith contemptuously and put a hand on her hips. “So what?” she asked, “Are you upset because Michael fell in love with me? You want him back, and he’s not looking, is that it?”

This time, Faith rolled her eyes. “No, Ellie, I’m not jealous. I’m concerned.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you,” Ellie said. “Michael tells me that he loves me and doesn’t want to be with you anymore. If he’s telling you something different, then you’ll have to take that up with him. I know I will.”

“I’m not trying to sleep with Michael,” Faith insisted. “I’m trying to figure out what your game is with him.”

“My *game*?” Ellie said incredulously. “Faith, you are utterly delusional. You’re insane! Oh my God! There’s no game, Faith. I’m in love with Michael. He’s the man I want to spend my life with. You had him, you lost him, now he’s with me. Deal with it!”

“For the last time,” Faith said, “I’m not jealous. I’m concerned. You say you love him, but you stiffen every time he touches you. You say you want to spend the rest of your life with him, but it takes you almost a year after meeting Michael to finalize your divorce, during which time you’re in regular contact with your ex-husband.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Faith!” Ellie said. “I swear to God, you hear hoofbeats and think a thief holding a boombox playing the theme to an old Western show as a distraction while his buddies rob a bank. Faith, I was married to Franklin for ten years, all right? Ten years. It’s not so easy to just walk away from that. I wasn’t *cringing* when Michael touched me, but he’s the second man to have ever touched me, and after

being certain that I would spend forever with Frank, it was an adjustment for me, a lot more than it was for Michael.

“And yet, I’ve made that adjustment. I’ve divorced Frank and moved in with Michael. I’m wearing Michael’s goddamned ring!”

She held up the gold circlet with a sizable diamond on her left hand’s ring finger. “I moved on, Faith!” she finished. “Time for you to do the same!”

But Faith wasn’t listening anymore. Something Ellie had said had fired every alarm in her head.

“You said his name was Franklin?”

Ellie blinked, “What?”

“Your ex-husband,” Faith repeated sternly, “What did you say his name was?”

Ellie blinked and took a step backwards. “Franklin. Franklin West.”

The world spun around Faith. She took a step backward and sat slowly, coming to rest on her backside on the concrete.

Ellie mouthed Faith’s name, but Faith didn’t hear her. She didn’t hear anything over the pounding in her chest.

Oh God.

That explained how he knew. That explained how he knew about David and Michael and Gordon. That explained how he managed to stay one step ahead of her all the time. That explained how he stayed one step ahead of everyone. He was getting firsthand information straight from the only agent who had any chance of stopping him.

She had been seeing the Copycat Killer in his office every week for the past year, and he had been learning everything there was to know about her, everything there was to know about everyone she loved.

And she had been fooled blind.

“Faith?” Ellie’s voice cut through the fog. “Faith, are you all right? Do you need me to call for help?”

Faith blinked and focused her vision on Ellie. Ellie stood a few feet away, looking uncertainly at Faith, but with genuine concern. “What’s going on? Are you having an attack of some kind?”

Faith stood. Ellie backed up warily and Faith said, “I’m sorry, Ellie. I made a mistake.”

Ellie blinked in surprise and confusion. “Well, that’s... I mean, it’s okay. You don’t need to be all... um...”

Her voice trailed off as Faith turned and walked away. The fog threatened at the corners of her psyche again, and she forced herself to go through the motions of calling a rideshare to the airport and booking a return flight to Philadelphia.

Images flashed in her mind of Doctor West smiling at her over his glasses. Doctor West laughing as she related an anecdote from a case. Doctor West listening intently as she shared her theories on the Copycat Killer’s motives and likely next kills. Doctor West asking her who was assigned to the Copycat Killer case now and if the Boss was letting her consult.

Doctor West advising her to let the case go, that it was bad for her mental health to continue looking for the Copycat Killer. For him. Doctor West laughing to himself as he wrote her a note over Gordon Clark’s murdered corpse.

Doctor West listening while she described to him the pain and hopelessness she felt under the original Donkey Killer’s knife.

Gradually, the fog receded, replaced by cold anger.

He would pay. So help her God, if it was the last thing she ever did, she would find Franklin West and make him pay. For taking away two years of her life. For driving a wedge between her and David and another between her and Michael. For keeping Ellie on a string for no other reason than to see how it would affect Faith’s friendship.

For murdering a man, she admired and respected as a friend and mentor. For Gordon.

“I’m coming for you, asshole.”

EPILOGUE

It was too bad. He had grown to like being a psychologist. Not as much as he enjoyed his other profession, and Faith, of course, was by far his most interesting patient, but he enjoyed the opportunity that psychology provided to examine the depths of human nature. It truly was fascinating what people would reveal to a complete stranger that they would keep from everyone they loved.

Oh well. All things came to an end eventually. He hadn't anticipated this ending anytime soon. He had actually hoped he could continue on as a psychologist after Faith Bold was dealt with. He found the mental war far more satisfying even than the killing.

Maybe he could alter his appearance and practice somewhere else. It was something to consider.

But for now, he had a job to do.

He carefully removed each book from its place on the shelf and wiped it thoroughly. He figured he had three to eight hours, depending on whether Faith came here alone or brought the FBI with her. That was more than enough time to make sure he cleaned his prints and DNA off of everything.

He thought that Faith would immediately begin hunting for him when she returned. It never occurred to him that she would go talk to Ellie. She had no reason to suspect Ellie of anything other than infidelity to Michael, and he didn't think that would matter enough to her.

Then again, Faith's mind worked in wondrous ways. She would find threads that seemed to make no sense to anyone, even her, and pick at them until she unraveled the most convoluted mysteries. Perhaps her subconscious mind knew that Ellie held the key to the answers she sought and so gave her conscious mind a reason to go talk to her even though logic dictated it was frivolous.

He wondered if he should have killed Ellie. He dismissed the idea before believing such an act would draw suspicion toward him. He still believed it. When an ex-wife died, the first place everyone looked was the ex-husband, and the last thing he needed was people looking at him.

People would be looking at him now. He frowned and straightened, the cleaning momentarily forgotten.

If Faith did bring her concerns to the field office, then people would be looking for him. If they were looking for him, then he would be forced into a corner. He could evade the FBI for a while, but if he remained in Philadelphia long enough, they would find him eventually. It would be incredibly difficult to get to Faith if she brought the Bureau in, as well. Going after her might even be what they expect and play directly into their hands.

If, on the other hand, she took matters into her own hands, then possibly he could get to her before she got to him. There was no way of knowing what she would do, though.

There was one thing he could do, but it would only work if Faith came here by herself first, before alerting the FBI. If she did come here first, then he believed wholeheartedly that this tactic would work to keep her from bringing her superiors in.

It was a gamble, but he had gambled before and come out on top.

He picked up his notepad from his desk and a pen and wrote. When he was finished, he tore the sheet off of his notepad and set it carefully on the already sanitized portion of the desk.

He smiled and nodded contentedly. Faith could simply ignore the note, but he was willing to bet she wouldn't. He was willing to bet her pride and anger would make her want him all to herself.

And if she did call the Bureau in, well, then she would learn what happened when you cornered a wolf.

Or a donkey.

He laughed aloud and resumed cleaning, taking his time and ensuring that when he left, the only sign of him that would

remain was his letter to Faith.

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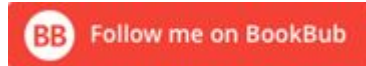
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